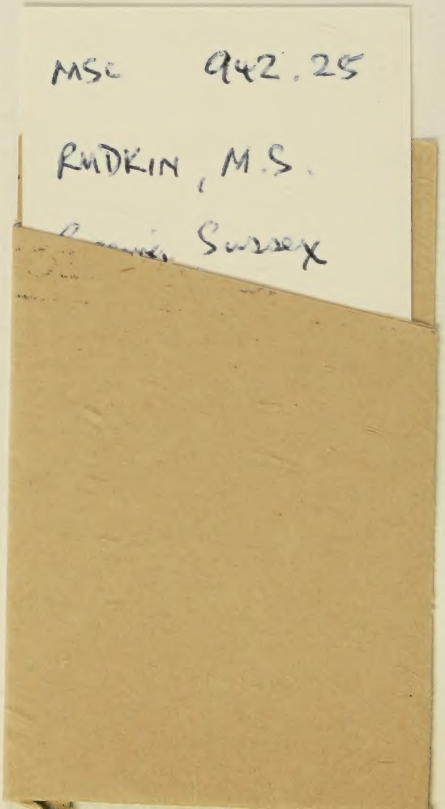
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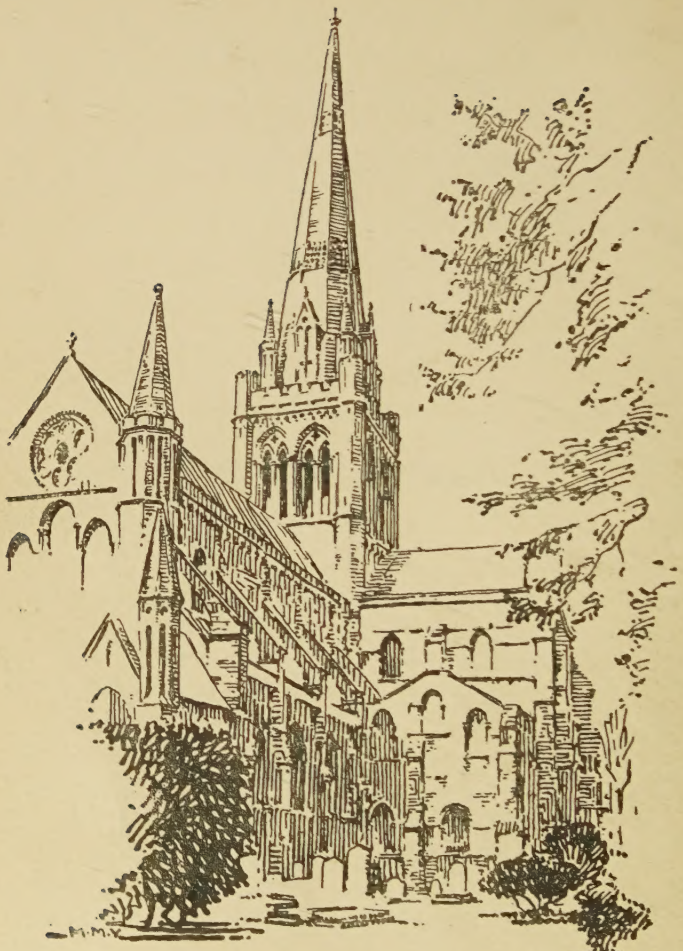

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By
MABEL S. RUDKIN

AUTHOR OF
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SEEING SUSSEX

CHAPTER I

THE COMING OF MRS. McJABBERS

DELIA McJABBER'S determination to see Sussex easily surmounted two successive checks. She had laid her plans carefully, and, immediately after her arrival from Canada, on a two months' tour of her English relatives, she had written to let us know that she had allotted the first four days of her sixth week to us:

"I am anxious to see you and Erasmus, and I am simply longing to see Sussex. A man on my boat, who had once picnicked at Fairlight, told me that it was the only county worth living in nowadays, and that everybody lives in it."

Unfortunately, the chosen date collided with one of the various Conferences which assist to keep the minds of the rural clergy from complete stagnation; and, naturally, she would wish to include the Vicar in her Sussex itinerary. She had been away from England for fifteen years, and I was merely a vague and unknown "in-law."

"It is a little tiresome," she wrote, after a short delay, "but I have arranged to transfer your four days to Maria Maltby. So I shall arrive on Friday,

instead of Monday. Of course, I ought to see Erasmus. But I think it is a pity that the clergy, over here, spend so much time in profitless discussions. Edward has not been well." (Edward was Mr. Maltby.)

Putting these concluding sentences together, I gathered that there had been some friction with Maria—or, rather, with Maria's husband, who has a will, almost, but evidently not quite, as inflexible as that of Mrs. McJabbers.

"*Ought* to see me, indeed!" said Erasmus, nettled by a phrase which pared him down to a mere duty. "I am afraid that living so long in the wilds has not improved her."

In view of the probable friction with the Maltbys, it was little short of a calamity when, two days before the appointed—Delia's appointed—date, cook went on the sick list. The weather was hot, the kitchen unattractive. But I remembered that, in her first letter, our impending visitor had mentioned some free days in her eighth and last week; and I clutched at this straw. A wire came promptly in reply— "Further alterations impossible. Can do cooking. Programme complete. Must see Sussex.—Delia."

And about seven o'clock, on Friday evening, she marched briskly up to the Vicarage and knocked in the resounding, imperative manner which sends excitable maids palpitating to the door. Freda did not pound; she knew that it was only Mrs. McJabbers, and had her own opinion, I fancy, as to that lady's persistency and culinary powers (which, by the way, we found it unnecessary to test).

"Well, Erasmus and Miranda, here I am!" She wore the inevitable horn-rimmed spectacles, and

seemed to be, as Henry Banister, our venerable gardener, said to Freda the next morning, "the kind o' woman as knew what she was after and went straight fer it." She put down her neat suit case and we went into the drawing-room.

"Not late, I hope, for your evening meal?" she said. "I ran down early to Hastings this morning, as, after the illimitable spaces of the prairie, crowds terrify me, and I knew your seaside week-end trains would be full. I explored Hastings, during the forenoon, and did Bexhill after lunch, so I have seen quite a lot of Sussex already."

"You must be tired," said the Vicar. "Hastings alone is a biggish place."

Mrs. McJabbers, I discovered, rarely smiled. At this moment she contented herself with merely looking superior.

"Possibly, Erasmus, although you are a student of geography—you take pupils, Maria tells me—you are not aware that the Island of Vancouver, upon which I now reside, has an area of twenty thousand square miles, and is yet but a speck upon the vast map of Canada. 'Biggish' is therefore *not* a word I should apply to Hastings. It is a breezy little place, with an interesting past. The man on my boat advised me to soak myself in *Tamarisk Town* before visiting the spot.

"'Soak' is a good word," I suggested. "It is one of the least dry books I know. It gives a vivid picture of the rise and growth of Hastings. Did you enjoy it?"

"Only the title page. Before I could proceed further I, unfortunately, lost the volume—probably on a seat at Victoria, where an old lady insisted

upon looking at my Canadian picture postcards—I always carry some in my bag—and distracted my attention. I fear Maria may be vexed, I had borrowed it from her. She is one of those people who do not understand the true philosophy of life, with its ruling principle of give and take."

"Did you climb up to the Castle?" The Vicar wrenched the conversation back to Hastings, and refused to look at me.

"Yes, I allotted half an hour to that. It was enough. I felt sorry for the monks who once lived there like eagles in a mountain eyrie. My shack on the prairie was scarcely more isolated." She bestowed a sigh, probably on the memory of the shack, possibly on that of those mediæval martyrs.

"But their routine was varied," pointed out Erasmus, who delights in digging up local history out of dusty archives. "They were canons as well as monks; and, on Sundays, used to ride over to the villages of Hollington, Wartling, and Ninfield, to take the services."

"Exchanging one dull spot for another, I perceive," said Mrs. McJabbers, confirming the impression I had already received that, quite unlike the man who had once picnicked at Fairlight, her opinion of Sussex would not be so immediately favourable. "I understand that the Monastery was dissolved by Henry VIII, and, although he was a man of whom, in some aspects, I cannot approve, I consider he was wise in taking this step. A pleasant little seascape is not all-sufficient, even for a monk."

"You visited the Caves, of course," I said.

"Yes. I hired a taxi, and directed the man to take me to the chief sights, and he insisted

upon including the Caves. In Canada, I always associate caves with cougars—a species of bear, you know. But your caves were quite bearless and empty."

Her tone was almost regretful; and it certainly flashed across my mind that a few stray cougars, roaming about, centuries ago, would have relieved the monotony for those poor, bored monks, perched up above.

"Where did you go next?" asked the Vicar, dismissing the cougars.

"I told the man to drive me to four churches, two 'High,' and two 'Low.' He seemed rather stupid about this—no doubt he was not a native, probably an importation from Kent—but, in the end, he did quite well. I thought St. Matthew's and Christ Church, St. Leonards, a nice contrast. At the latter church I came in time for a service, and it was so strange to see the clergyman arrive punctually and remain to the end."

"Isn't that the custom in Canada?" The Vicar was surprised and a little shocked.

"In Vancouver, yes—but, on the prairie, of which I have more knowledge, no. It was quite an exciting matter for speculation as to what points in the service would witness the arrival and departure of the minister. He was either very late, or had to rush off, in a few minutes, to the next parish, perhaps thirty miles away. Congregations in Hastings, I imagine, do not suffer from inconvenience of this kind, to judge from the abundance—not to say plethora—of clergy whom I observed in the streets."

"Many of them are old and retired," pleaded the Vicar.

"They looked to me hale, and far from decrepit," returned Mrs. McJabbers coldly. "But to continue. After a luncheon of salmon and raspberry cream, at Patterson's—and I really enjoyed *that*—I bused to Bexhill. I must confess, Miranda, that, after your praise of the town, I was disappointed. It is clean and tidy, I admit; but it seemed to me the sort of place where nothing ever happens—nothing of consequence, I mean. Neither did I travel thousands of miles to behold anything so deplorably new."

"You will be astonished to hear," retorted Erasmus, instantly stung into defence, "that Bexhill, spelt Bexelei, is mentioned in Domesday Book as possessing 'twenty hides, twenty-six ploughs, and two churches.'"

"Twenty-six ploughs are exactly the kind of rustic equipment I should have anticipated," said our visitor, still inimical.

What *could* have happened in Bexhill thus to discolour her vision of that friendly town? Had she sat in a draught in the Colonnade, or met the pessimistic Mrs. Dabb, one of our parishioners, in her tea-room? At this juncture the gong opportunely sounded.

"That means, I expect, that now we shall have something to eat."

Mrs. McJabbers' severity abated; but, on her way to the door, she paused to glance out of the window and her eyes fell, with obvious disapproval, upon our stately monkey-tree.

"I trust that those uncouth specimens of vegetation are not a common feature of your Sussex scenery. In Vancouver, one sees no monkey-trees. Why do you not cut it down, Erasmus?"

"Because Miranda would not like it," he returned most unexpectedly. "She admires the monkey-tree."

For a moment Mrs. McJabbers regarded him in pitying silence.

"I have always noticed," she said at last, "that when a man is asked why he does not perform an obvious duty, he always gives the most extraordinary reason."

"Fortunately," I slipped in, "windmills are more often to be seen in Sussex than monkey-trees. I hope you like windmills?"

"'Like' is rather an unsatisfactory word, don't you think, applied indiscriminately. One 'likes' sugar in one's tea, or one does not, but, as to 'liking' windmills—well, they are, certainly, less of a disfigurement than monkey-trees. Did the gong just now imply that we dine at once?"

"In ten minutes," I said.

"Good. Afterwards, we will have a field day among the photographs." And Mrs. McJabbers followed Freda and the neat suit case majestically upstairs.

Overtaking the Vicar presently in the hall, I saw that he was carrying a fat album, filled with "Snapshots of Sunny Sussex."

"You may replace that in the study," I whispered. "The field-day is to be among Delia's photographs, not ours. She tells me she has brought a hundred of the Port of Vancouver alone."

The next morning it was arranged that the Vicar should pilot Mrs. McJabbers to the church, show her the beautiful view of Downs and distant sea from the little Western gate, and that I should join them at the ancient yew later on.

We had a struggle over this programme, for Delia had spoken during breakfast of "an hour or two" at her writing table. But as she was leaving us by a morning train on Monday, to spend the first four days of her seventh week with another relative, the time for exploration was scanty. "She has come here to see Sussex," said Erasmus sternly, "and see it she shall."

He persuaded her to pacify her correspondents with postcards of Battle Abbey until she reached Cousin Angela, who, as she did not live in Sussex, probably had no sights or scenery worthy of exhibition.

As I approached the venerable yew, I heard Mrs. McJabbers and her cicerone engaged in an animated discussion—no doubt, I surmised, about the age of the tree, which always drew conflicting opinions from its long trail of visitors.

I put in my spoke at once.

"Experts declare that is more than a thousand years old—older than the church."

"That is easily credible," returned Mrs. McJabbers, very upright and dignified in an unnecessary Burberry. "Your 'ancient church' is almost as deceptively modern in appearance as your Bexhill, although Erasmus, for a full hour, has thrust upon me details of its historic claims. But we were not discussing the tree. I was explaining the curious methods adopted for the religious training of the Indians. They are placed, willy nilly, in different 'Reservations'—Roman Catholic, Wesleyan, Presbyterian, and so on—just, I imagine, as there happens to be room."

"Most iniquitous!" pronounced the Vicar, quite red with indignation. "I shall write to all the Church

papers about it at once. I might even get a paragraph into the *County Herald;* it is a large-hearted paper." And he left us without more ado.

I turned to Mrs. McJabbers. "Now come with me. I want to show you a fine bit of old Sussex, not many yards away."

I took her into the Big Kitchen Garden; and, there at the end of the path, was Henry Banister, quite jaunty in his new summer hat, assiduously reviving a drooping row of lettuces from a water-bodge.

"Here," I said, "is something even more wonderful and alive than the venerable yew—and Banister will be eighty-six in May."

"Good morning," said Mrs. McJabbers graciously, when I had introduced them. "Very hot, is it not? I anticipate a thunderstorm" (which accounted for the Burberry).

"Maybe you're right." This, I knew, was the veteran's polite formula expressive of entire disagreement. He put down the watering can, and instructed his youthful assistant, Tommy Sirius, to refill the bodge. "You've come a long way, m'am, I hear tell."

"Indeed yes. From Vancouver—Canada, you know. I expect you have heard of that vast possession of the British Crown?"

"I've a married darter in Montreal," said Banister, always equal to the occasion. "Maybe you know that city?" he added innocently.

But Mrs. McJabbers, bent upon being agreeable, swept aside the repartee and Montreal, and produced a coin from her handbag. "You smoke, of course." He shook his head. "Thank ee ma'am, but I ha'int

no use for 'bacca. Got cured o' that as a bi'." He chuckled at the recollection.

"Tell us about it," I said, for I knew the story.

The 'wheel-b'rer' was handy, and he sat down on it. "Well, it happened this way. I wer' sent —long o' April it wer' and I wer' about eighteen —to fetch th' doctor from Battle fer one o' my brothers. Th' parish doctor he wer,' as 'tended them wi' large families for nothing—there were twelve on us—and a rare, slow, cautious man, a-riding over a-horseback, and taking his time about it. As I went through Battle Wood I thought what I'd do. So I bought a wooden pipe, half an ounce o' bacca and a box o' fusees; and when I were' coming back I set down on a log, and lit a pipe. Afore long I felt that queer like I could scarce straggle home. 'You do look orkard,' mother says, 'you'd better get to bed,' and I did. The next day I wer' out wi' m' two young masters, threshing oats wi' a flail, an they offered me 'bacca. 'No,' I says, 'I kin gi' ye some.' 'Oh,' they says, 'why don't ye put some in your mouth, and chew it—it be good.' I b'lieved 'em, and precious ill and orkard I wer' agen. Never cared for 'bacca sin' then, and a tidy lot o' money it's saved me, I reckon."

"Isn't he a grand bit of old Sussex?" I said, as we came away.

"Ye-es," said Mrs. McJabbers, who had never borne so unequal a part in any conversation since her arrival at the Vicarage. "A bit garrulous, perhaps."

"Garrulous! I love to hear him talk! He is a mint of wisdom, patience and common sense. When I see him I always wish that I were as rich as—as

a film star at Hollywood—Crœsus was a pauper in comparison—so that we could make his old age more comfortable. Still, I daresay he is really happier, with his spades and rakes than those idle old men in the London clubs, dozing behind the *Morning Post* or *Financial News*."

"You say rather odd things, Miranda. But Maria prepared me——" Young Sirius, vigorously trundling the water-bodge through the gate, suddenly cannoned into her and diverted the conversation. What had Maria prepared her for, I wondered? Probably, regarding me afar, from the uncomprehending angle of an "in-law," for any eccentricity.

At luncheon our visitor, suggesting that we should no doubt be busy with our various arrangements for Sunday, proposed a solitary excursion to three or four of our famous Sussex castles. "I shall be content to wander alone," she said, "and saturate myself in the romance of the past."

The Vicar pointed out that, as the early chieftains had a provoking prejudice against each other as next-door neighbours, it would be wiser to concentrate on one castle, and suggested Pevensey.

"If it is really antique, and not likely to be turned into a Girls' School——"

"Most unlikely," Erasmus assured her. "It should meet with all your requirements."

Mrs. McJabbers caught the three o'clock bus across the Marshes, and disappeared for five hours. Was she sketching, measuring, possibly excavating? we asked each other. Surely, never had the castle attracted so enthralled a pilgrim!

I met her, outside her door, on her belated return.

"You found the castle absorbing?" I said.

"I had a glimpse of it as I passed. The conductor omitted to put me down, and I was carried on to Eastbourne." She paused. Was it my fancy that she blushed?

"And what did you do there?" I asked relentlessly.

"I went to a concert party. And, coming back, I sat next to a delightful elderly man from your village —Pliny, I think he said his name was—who has a son in Saskatoon, and we talked about him all the way home. Don't mention the concert party to Erasmus—he takes Roman earthworks and Norman keeps so seriously. And, after all," said Mrs. McJabbers defiantly, "Eastbourne *is* in Sussex, though it isn't a ruin yet!"

We received a grateful letter from her, a few days later, in which she alluded to the "indelible impression our historic county had left upon her mind." "Yet a horrid doubt intrudes itself," I said, as I handed the note, laughing, to the Vicar: "Did Mrs. McJabbers really come here to see Sussex—or to tell us about Vancouver and the prairie?"

CHAPTER II

ANOTHER FRENCH INVASION

CENTURIES ago, before the English people fully tumbled to the fact that in the fair land of Sussex they possessed a territory of unique fascination, our French neighbours, ever on the alert to perceive the desirable, cast inquisitive eyes across the Channel. The prospect, combined with other circumstances, provoked that enterprising speculator, William the Norman, one fine autumn day, to rush over an indomitable army. He saw, he came, he conquered; and initiated a fashion of invasion that, as time passed, became a settled habit.

In the fourteenth century the French marauders were particularly active:

"The wind is favourable to-day; let us go over and plunder Sussex." Was this the resourceful policy of French generals, in mediæval days, to provide occupation for their restless troops? It looks very like it. The records of Winchelsea tell us how very unpleasant those excursions proved. Once, the gallant Abbot of Battle came triumphantly to the rescue. On another occasion he was routed, the town sacked and burnt. I can imagine the muddy Abbot, as he galloped wearily homewards, reflecting sadly upon the incongruities and inconvenience of the martial duties which drew him

so often from his religious exercises in his palatial Abbey. He was indeed a vigorous pioneer of muscular Christianity. Altogether, between the trying society of English kings who called to borrow money, and the necessity of warding off ferocious French adventurers, many an Abbot of Battle led a life as hectic as that of any modern flying hero.

But time has softened, as it inevitably does, the rough proceedings of the past. The vying claims of different places along the coast to have received the first imprints of the Conqueror's determined feet, suggest that a landing which completely spoiled the October of that memorable year and laid waste the countryside is now regarded as an event that conferred honour on the place that witnessed it.

The attractions of Sussex, to which William succumbed nine centuries ago, irresistibly lure the French youths of to-day. The invasion still continues, but now the visitors arrive armed, not with pikes or stinging bows and arrows, but with innocuous cameras and tennis rackets, bent on the peaceful errand of "improving their English."

Directly their long summer holidays begin, French boys appear at the Sussex seaside towns, pallid and exhausted after a strenuous term and the trials of the Newhaven crossing. In that glorious heat of last year a bigger contingent than ever mustered at Bexhill, gathered in critical groups around the bandstand—one French boy attracts another as infallibly as the treacle jar the bee—sun-bathed on the beach, and murmured among themselves that the English meringues were good. Best not to praise aloud in the ears of a people already so complacent and with such inflated notions of the French exchequer.

"It seem to me," said Raymond de Soulise, who was staying at the Vicarage, "that all the boys of France come to this country and all your boys go to France. Better for my English, I think, for me not to have removed myself from Paris. But," he added with one of his quick ingratiating smiles, "I myself chose to come to this house, because of the photograph of the tennis court and the beautiful garden. I love the tennis and to play on a grass lawn will be new. All the courts in Paris are hard. Here I play all day without fatigue."

"But you must devote some time to exploring the county," insisted the Vicar; "it is unheard of to visit Sussex and not see something of its beauties and antiquities. No one would dream of coming here simply to play tennis!"

"My mother know England," said Raymond smiling again, "and she tell me that in this part there are many grand castles. So, on the more wet days, I make my journeys to them. I myself have a château in the country in France, so yours will be of interest."

He wore an imposing signet-ring and an air of elegance; and was, we soon discovered, as blue-blooded as a cuttle-fish. He was a marquis—his father had been one of the victims of Verdun—and the grandson of a celebrated duke.

His easy grace of manner, his gay, frequent laugh and readiness to talk and make friends were engaging characteristics. He liked to meet everyone, and would perch lightly on a gate chatting blithely to the school-children as they passed if he had nothing else to do.

"It is sad that Georges do not play the tennis," he said one day, referring to another French boy in the house. "He prefer to read—read—anything—even

the dull guide books of Sussex. To please him, though the sun still shines, I say that I will go with him to Battle Abbey to-morrow."

"As I have a camera it is necessary to take many photographs," explained Georges, dark, studious, a precocious fourteen, boasting no aristocratic forebears. "A camera is for use."

The two boys belonged to such opposite social and political camps that, had it not been for Raymond's persistent good nature, their constant arguments might have developed an uncomfortable situation. As it was, mine was often an onerous responsibility, as I sat trying to hold the scales of justice between one French boy whose ancestors' heads had been cut off, and another whose progenitors had possibly assisted at the grim business.

Georges was clever, and knew his history. Raymond, without attempting to dive into the psychology of revolutions, clung to the tradition implied in the outworn maxim, "The king can do no wrong."

"The people had much provocation," I agreed with Georges when the subject cropped up at supper on the eve of the Battle expedition.

"The kings and nobles were truly wicked," he said. "If you had suffered so here in this country, heads would have rolled off also, even in this very agreeable Sussex."

"*Do* have another tart, Raymond," I urged hastily. Georges, once mounted on his republican hobby-horse, could be very tiresome.

Raymond laughed amiably. "Thank you, Madame. My appetite is very good, I can eat many tarts."

"I read a little book from the Reverend's study," announced Georges, curtly refusing more pastry, "to

make me ready for the Abbey; and, Raymond, as you are proud of kings, you may know that it speak of the much land King Harold had in this county. So you are happy to be in so royal a place." He grinned mockingly across the table at the youthful Marquis.

"It is recorded in the Domesday Book"—the Vicar eagerly picked up this instructive thread of conversation—"that Harold possessed land both at Whatlington and Crowhurst. His knowledge of the locality enabled him to place his men to considerable advantage before the Battle of Hastings."

"Yet he was beaten, amid much slaughter," said Georges, with immense satisfaction.

A shower the next morning reconciled Raymond to the temporary separation from his tennis racket, and he departed cheerfully by bus to Battle. Georges, hugging his camera, cycled cautiously ahead, well content to save at least a shilling. He came of a notoriously shrewd and frugal race.

"We have had much enjoyment," declared Raymond on their return, dashing in, very pink and handsome, to my sanctum. "We have seen many, many things."

"You went round with the guide, I suppose?"

"Ah, yes, but he speak in so strange a voice that I not follow all. The trees and the gardens are very marvellous. I see, too, the old Refectory. I shut my eyes"—he closed his sparkling blue ones—"and behold! the monks feasting—feasting—feasting! It was very good then to be a monk, I think!"

"But fish always on Fridays," pointed out Georges who could be invariably relied upon to supply the shading to any picture. "Fish out of the lake, with many bones."

"Fish also is very well." The ecstatic expression,

conjured up by the vision in the Refectory, lingered on Raymond's face. Fat capon, or fat carp, what did it signify?

"I have taken many photographs," said Georges, importantly. "The guide show where Harold fell, and I take two of that. My father will be very glad of *those*. One day, I go to London and see where your King Charles lost his head; and I take two of that place also."

His brusque manners and unholy delight in slain monarchs flung my sympathies irretrievably on the side of the gracious, smiling Raymond. The scales went down with a bump. Who dares to say that birth and breeding do not count in this flimsy and uncivil age? They are surely the cement which still retains the crumbling social structure in some kind of architectural dignity.

"You not tell me, Madame," regretted Raymond, "that there are girls at school at the ancient Abbey. True, I not see them, which was sad, but I see the fine tennis courts where they play. It was good to be an old monk, but better to be a young miss at Battle Abbey now."

"I wonder the young miss does not fear the ghosts," scoffed Georges. "The guide say four skeletons were dug up of late. It would have pleased me to be there," he added, darker and more grim than ever. "Many, too, are buried near the chapel."

"English girls nowadays are not afraid of anything," I assured him. "If one of them met the phantom of a mediæval abbot lurking in the cloisters, she would simple say 'Good evening!' and hurry in to write a letter about him to the Psychical Society. But ghosts are out of date as thrills."

"That is well," said Raymond seriously. "I would rather meet the girls than the ghosts."

"The girls would be too busy to talk to you," I said laughing. "Learning history, for instance, which has some local colour at the Abbey. King John came there twice. You have heard of him, I expect, and the Magna Charta." Georges nodded. Would he, I asked myself, travel to Runnymede to "snap" the scene of another tyrant's "overthrow"? "And Henry III," I continued, "dropped in before the Battle of Lewes to requisition funds from the wealthy Abbot to pay the soldiers."

"You see," said Georges, pouncing with avidity on this deplorable incident, "how the royal ones behave! To arrive and instantly demand money from the host is not polite."

"Fortunately," I said, "Edward II was more tactful, so he had a very genial welcome."

Raymond glanced at his wrist-watch. "It is five minutes before dinner. I had fear to be late. For long no bus would fetch me from Battle. It is a very quiet town in which to stay." His tone indicated that the adjective conveyed no compliment.

"It does seem rather depressed," I admitted. "Overshadowed, perhaps, by the Abbey; and suffering from the perpetual stigma of not being mentioned in Domesday Book. Hard lines on a spot destined otherwise to be so illustrious, although I believe there were no houses or inhabitants there at the time."

"I go now to remove the dirt from my fingers," said Raymond; "but, Madame," he added courteously, "please tell me more presently about this Book of Dooms of which you speak. Doubtless Georges, who is so wise, know all"; and planting this amply

deserved shaft, he ran gaily upstairs, humming an air from *Faust*.

For several days the glory of the weather offered no excuse to Georges for urging Raymond to further trips afield. The latter, slim and incredibly nimble, ran to and fro all day on the tennis court, as he joyfully tested the abilities of any antagonist we could provide. His explorations of Sussex were limited to hunts among the rhododendrons or in the adjoining school playground, for missing balls, when Flash—good dog!—would be called to assist from her snug place in the sun.

"To-morrow the wireless say it rain," Georges informed us one Friday night at supper. "It will be very well then for us to take another journey. I was at Bodiam this afternoon with myself, which is not amusing. Still, I fill my camera again with many photographs. There is one of the chapel for the Reverend, and one of the banqueting hall for you, Raymond."

"Bodiam! That is a strange name, I think," said Raymond, omitting thanks, but his interest in the fruit salad undaunted.

Erasmus awoke suddenly from a reverie—no doubt anent things parochial, for the village grows more modern and more feverishly active every day.

"Bodiam means the 'ham,' or home, of one Bod, or Bode," he said, delighted to supply information. "But the Castle, of which you saw the beautiful ruins, was built in 1386, by Sir Edward Dalyngrigge. Lord Curzon left the place as a legacy to the nation recently."

"Now you hear, Raymond, of these 'sirs' and 'lords,' you are sorry you have not gone," suggested

Georges wickedly. "True, we hear of no kings, which, perhaps, spoils all."

"Where do you propose to go to-morrow?" I inquired, while Georges pushed away his plate and scrambed his napkin recklessly into its ring, in token that the meal, for him, was over.

"I find again a little book," he said, "which say much of Winchelsea and Rye." He produced it, considerably the worse for wear, from his pocket. "Often the French go to Winchelsea. Listen, Raymond: 'In 1359, three thousand French landed, set fire to the town, killed many of the inhabitants who were at Mass, and departed with much plunder.'" His dark eyes seemed to glisten behind his spectacles. Did he think it was a good day's work? Possibly. "But perhaps, Raymond, you like better to know that King Edward I of England visited the town in 1297."

"You will find both Winchelsea and Rye quite delightful and most picturesque. I should start early by train," suggested Erasmus, doing his utmost to secure a peaceful Saturday.

"If some sandwiches and fruit can be prepared," said Raymond, "we will only then return in time for the supper. I will carry the sandwiches and Georges the camera; and we will both take care." They agreed, without argument, to this sensible division.

"At Rye I shall see the dungeon tower where many prisoners were chained," said Georges, "and the old inn where the famous ones smuggled. It will be very useful for my camera."

His anticipations of a pleasurable day were amply fulfilled. Supper time brought the two home again, dusty, almost owning to fatigue, saturated with the

spirit of adventure. Raymond, it transpired, had realised something of the romance and charm of the old-world towns.

"I could almost live in Rye," he said. "I feel myself there to be in life hundreds of years ago. And the tea at the Mermaid Inn was truly good."

"I take a photograph of the church clock," put in Georges, whose camera seemed to be positively bulging. "A man say to me that it was there before the Armada sailed to England. We go also to the Town Hall, and I see the head of the town's murderer, of which I did not before know." It was evident that he regarded this gruesome relic as the glorious coping stone to a delirious round of sights.

"To-morrow I write to my mother and tell all," said Raymond. "But in the morning I go to Mass in Bexhill as she like. In France, we have no religion, and the whole country is in ruin because of that. In the afternoon, perhaps, I walk in the park of Ashburnham—and then for me no more of Sussex!"

"But you do not leave till the 28th—another week," I pointed out.

Georges picked up his camera, and paused by the door. "He mean he have no more money to make the journeys. Me also. To finish the photographs has cost much. Now we rest here and amuse ourselves very well without expense."

Raymond went happily back to his tennis, and Georges spent the greater part of the radiant days that followed in a deck-chair, reading a *Life of Oliver Cromwell*, with occasional interludes of cricket.

Old Henry Banister, laboriously pushing the water-bodge, looked across the lawn, one morning, at the two boys. I went over to speak to him.

"Why don't you get them to help you?" I said.

The veteran stopped, and mopped his wrinkled face. "I arsked 'em, right enough. The Markis, as they call him, says, 'Ter-morrer; I play tennis to-day.' Very perlite *he* wer', but I reckon he's got a ter-morrer as 'ull never come round. The little 'un just laughed, and said he wer' too busy seeing Sussex." Banister chuckled feebly. "I'm mortal sure as whatever he sees, t'won't be me nor th' water-bodge."

He pushed the latter half a yard, and paused again. "Couldn't you get rid of 'em, ma'am, and get some really nice bi's?"

CHAPTER III

THE DESCENT OF DR. HENKLE

AFTER breakfast, one stormy morning in last October, Erasmus pursued me into the greenhouse, with a letter in his hand. I fancied, from his dubious expression, that he had purposely chosen the soothing environment of flower and fern to break a piece of unpalatable news.

"Will you look at this?" he said, holding out a dingy half-sheet of paper, decorated with a few lines of scraggly writing. "It is from Henkle. I ran across him, you remember, in the summer, outside the British Museum. He seemed so delighted when he heard we were living in Sussex that I thought this would come, sooner or later." His tone indicated resignation in the face of inevitable disaster. I turned reluctantly from the calceolarias, which I was putting into winter quarters, and glanced at the note. It was scarcely legible, though, certainly, concise.

"Dear Padre,—May I descend upon you for a brief visit on the 15th? It has become imperative for me to undertake some researches in your neighbourhood. There is an excellent train reaching Bexhill at 4.55.—Yours as ever, JOHN HENKLE."

I had never met Dr. Henkle, who had been at school with Erasmus, and until the recent encounter had, subsequently, faded out of sight. But there was a vivid photograph of him, as a complacent-looking boy, with rough hair and an alarmingly high forehead, on the study mantelpiece; and I knew the type of man too often evolved from these perky, untidy, and aggressively intellectual beginnings.

"He doesn't give us much time," I pointed out. "To-day is the 13th." (Afterwards I realised what a fitting date this was.) "I wonder how he defines a brief visit?"

"Probably as a long week-end. He has many engagements in London, giving lectures, and that sort of thing. Perhaps you will like him," Erasmus added, not too hopefully. "He is—er—quite out of the common, and a tremendously keen antiquarian. When we had lunch together that day in Town he talked the whole time about the excavations at Pulborough—even the waiter seemed fascinated, and I found out that he came from Arundel."

"I hope he will not talk to me about earthworks or iron implements," I said laughing. "He is a bachelor though, isn't he? and perhaps explains his solitude by a poor opinion of woman's brains. Some dreadfully clever men take that line—so I may escape."

"Any audience is good enough," responded Erasmus gloomily, "for a man with one fixed idea like Henkle. He simply ignored my attempts to introduce the parish as a subject for discussion, and boomed on steadily about Down flints, ramparts, and covered ways. But I thought it was going too far when he emptied the salt and sugar castors on the table to illustrate pits and boundaries."

"I can understand that the waiter enjoyed himself," I said. "No doubt the tip was commensurate. And a man with eight letters after his name can safely commit almost any kind of eccentricity. Send him a postcard and say we shall be delighted to see him. He may amuse me, after all."

"He is a distinguished man, of course, and quite a good sort." The Vicar struggled to be fair in spite of Dr. Henkle's pachyderm-like indifference to the functions of Church councils and the management of schools.

I pressed down a calceolaria into its pot as Erasmus vanished in the direction of the house. Was he disappointed at my ready acquiescence? And was it purely my imagination that he was keeping something back?

The tempestuous weather continued; and my first glimpse of the enthusiast—who had wired to say that he preferred to walk from the station—was as he stood on the mat, just outside the front door, shaking himself like a water-spaniel. He was a short, sturdily built man, with a pleasant face; and he was exceedingly wet.

I opened with the usual, obvious condolence.

"Yes, I am rather damp," he agreed, with a cheerful little bubble of a laugh. "But the trek from Bexhill gave me an opportunity of absorbing something of the freshness of your marvellous air."

He had absorbed so much of its moisture that I was quite alarmed. I contributed another inevitable remark.

"Oh, I never catch cold," he assured me blithely. "Immunity from such ills is merely a question of common sense and adequate clothing." He was dex-

terously extricating himself as he spoke from a woollen muffler and an ample mackintosh. "Besides, to catch cold, in the invigorating atmosphere of Sussex, would be unpardonable." He bubbled again. "As a matter of fact, my dripping state is appropriate. The Padre has told you, I expect, that I was called 'Jonah' at school."

No; Erasmus, I informed him, had neglected to supply me with this piquant detail.

"He can't have forgotten," surmised Dr. Henkle thoughtfully. "Any way the name has stuck to me ever since. Just because tiresome accidents sometimes occur where I happen to be. At the Pinkertons', in Brighton, for instance, in the spring. On the day of my arrival the cook fell down the area steps and broke her arm, and, an hour or two before I left, Tommy Pinkerton cut off the tip of his finger in the mowing machine. Merely unfortunate coincidences, obviously. It is preposterous to translate human carelessness into vengeful mutterings of the Olympian gods! But this scientific age is grossly superstitious." He had been vigorously rubbing his muddy boots, and now gave them a swift, final polish.

"Someone told me the other day," I said, "that in Sussex villages, under the surface there still exists a firm belief in witchcraft."

"It is the same everywhere, even in an enlightened town like Brighton." He picked up his moist handbag. "If I might have a lamp in my room, I should like to look through some notes before we dine. As I told your good husband with reference to the recent excavations——"

"Erasmus asked me to apologise for him," I said, with a timely recollection of this neglected courtesy.

"He was obliged to attend the Ruri-Decanal Conference at Hastings—an unescapable affair—but he is due now in a few minutes."

"Good. I foresaw, from the close attention that he paid to my description of the Celtic-Roman pottery, dug up at Pulborough, that he would prove an ideal companion. Pinkerton is keen, but I seem to have lost touch with him lately. He made rather a flimsy excuse, I thought, the last time I asked him to put me up."

Dr. Henkle hastened upstairs in the wake of Freda. I watched his ascent absently. Was I sufficiently modern and so completely civilised, I asked myself, that sympathy for Mrs. Pinkerton was the only feeling evoked by those untoward happenings at Brighton?

Our guest briskly reappeared directly the gong sounded for dinner, with clean cuffs, dry, lightly brushed hair, and a couple of note-books under his arm.

"I congratulate you both," he said warmly as we sat down, "upon your superlative good fortune in becoming residents in this favoured region. Yours is indeed a county of extraordinary distinction and attractiveness."

"Earthworks to the right of us, earthworks to the left of us," I murmured to Flash, spreading out her supper on her newspaper tablecloth. The amiable dog, deluded by the pleasing supposition that I alluded to the abundance of her biscuits, wagged an ecstatic tail.

"Sussex is certainly full of charm"—the Vicar tactfully drowned my rash aside—"Beachy Head, the Downs, Fairlight, the many lovely old houses

and parks, all deservedly have their quota of admirers."

"No doubt." Dr. Henkle attacked his cutlet with extreme deliberation, and the horrid fear shot through me that it might be tough.

"Unhappily, artistically and æsthetically speaking, I have no eyes. I am almost as hopeless as the poor fellow commemorated by the poet, who was so obtuse about the primrose by the river's brim"—he bubbled cheerfully. Perhaps the cutlet would do us credit yet. "Almost, but not quite. Although the Downs, for example, make no pictorial appeal, they appear to me, from another standpoint, fraught with immense possibilities."

There could be but one interpretation of this remark.

"You mean," I said, "as a promising site for further excavations?"

"I mean," explained the enthusiast impressively, "as the scene of another discovery of human fossils even more world-shaking than that of the Piltdown skull."

"Do you really think that the Missing Link might perhaps turn up in Sussex?" I was quite thrilled by the idea.

"The Missing Link? Well, express it in that way, if you like." He smiled indulgently. "The crux is that we do not know so far where the first men were evolved. Many scientists believe that West Africa is the most likely place. I am not convinced. I think the fossilised remains we need may be discovered anywhere. Why not in Sussex, which has already yielded that precious gift to the world, the skull of the 'Dawn Man?' It would be a fitting climax to its long and stirring history."

"It would be a grand day for old Henry Banister," I suggested, "if it fell to him, in the Big Kitchen Garden, to bridge this formidable gap in the story of man's evolution! Though I should put it to him rather more simply than that. But I fear it would not be the right strata, and that even he might not dig quite deeply enough."

"Who knows?" Dr. Henkle was compelled to talk to me, owing to his host's temporary absorption in the coal bill—a document which, as a rule, failed to hold him spellbound. It was impolite, although the note had been placed by his plate. Could it be, I wondered, that the Vicar cared—and knew—less about the Piltdown skull than he wished the Doctor to suspect?

"The precious relic," the latter continued, "was discovered in 1912, by workmen, who were digging gravel for the roads. They called the attention of a well-known archæologist in the vicinity to their find; and I never pass it in the Natural History Museum without thinking——"

He was interrupted by a loud crash, followed by the murmur of agitated voices, in the not far distant kitchen. Freda, hurriedly bringing in the apple-tart, nervously explained that the soup tureen, apparently on its own initiative and impetus, had rolled to the edge of the dresser, and callously precipitated itself upon the floor. It was a soup tureen of high prestige, intended to do Dr. Henkle honour, and its abominable conduct robbed me, for the moment, of all interest in him as an antiquarian of repute. But as a "Jonah," as a harbinger of ill, he provided food for disturbing meditation. Was this casualty but the prelude to a series of tiresome accidents?

The two men talked on; I dimly heard Dr. Henkle declare that it was the ambition of his life to join the Kibbo Kift and become a "Piltdown Pilgrim"; the word "earthworks" crept back into the conversation. I heard their voices indistinctly as one does the Frenchman broadcasting from the Eiffel Tower. I was thinking that I would give much for five minutes alone with Mrs. Pinkerton.

"I am glad it is fine for our expedition to-day," said Dr. Henkle, coming down to breakfast very bright and chirpy, betimes, the next morning. "The Padre and I arranged to go, by train, to Lewes, and walk out to the Caburn camp. The two miles' tramp will do us good."

"It will have to be a solitary excursion," I said. "Unfortunately, Erasmus has developed a shocking cold, and to-morrow is Sunday. It always is Sunday, I've noticed, when the head of a clerical household knocks up. But the Vicar has not had a cold for months." A train of thought which started with his untimely chill landed me significantly at Mrs. Pinkerton's door.

"It is a pity. The Padre would have revelled in the Caburn. I was there when the three trial trenches were dug, a year or two ago"—Dr. Henkle got under way at once with a poached egg and a congenial theme—"and I consider the evidence that a settled community originally existed there practically conclusive, in spite of the absence of a circus. There is a crescent-shaped declivity suggestive of that, but all attempts to definitely prove its presence failed."

"A circus for the ancient Romans, a cinema for the modern Briton, both indispensable, I suppose."

I was glad to hear the cough which heralded the Vicar's approach. No mistress of a household really cares to discuss the habits of the ancient Romans at eight-thirty in the morning. She has other and more vital problems to consider, notably the puddings for the day.

"Precisely. A circus, as a public diversion of athletic games and feats—not performing ponies or elephants"—this was for my enlightenment—"was immensely popular in those old days. Sorry about your cold"—as Erasmus entered—"your trip with me is off, I understand." Dr. Henkle seemed slightly vexed, but soon cheered up again. "We were talking about the discoveries at the Caburn."

"Some valuable coins, it seems, were found there"—the Vicar huskily asserted himself. "Six British coins among them, with a human head on one side and an animal on the other. An authority describes the devices as 'somewhat rude.'"

I listened in mingled surprise and admiration. Collections of coins of a later date were wont to interest the Vicar more. Could belated studies of a book on numismatics, which I had seen on his study table, have contributed to this provoking cold?

"I have seen and examined all the coins," said Dr. Henkle, ruthlessly extinguishing my faint hope that our side, at last, had scored a goal. "But do not try to talk, Padre—save your voice for to-morrow. Let me carry on; it will be a pleasure." He radiated the utmost sympathy and good nature.

He carried on so successfully that presently he had to scuttle, post-haste, to the Stocks to catch the only bus that could connect him with an early

train to Lewes. He did not reappear until after nine, tired but triumphant.

"I have had a wonderful day," he said, "first at the Caburn, then back to Lewes, a glimpse at the Museum, and dinner. Glad the Padre did not wait up for me."

Dr. Henkle decided to attend the morning service, and joined me in the hall when the first bell began to ring.

"I am an old-fashioned Sunday-ite," he said. "I find it restful. Some of my friends chaff me about it, but I don't care. I like to do my bit to back up those who are trying to Christianise public opinion. With twenty-five kinds of poison gas, any one of which would snuff out an entire city, it is the only solution to avert the destruction of civilisation."

"Talking of Sunday," I said, "I heard an amusing, true Sussex story yesterday. A girl carrying some flowers and fruit to decorate a village church for the harvest festival, was greeted by an old man leaning over a gate. 'Lucky I saw you, Mary,' he said. 'Now I know to-morrow's all right. Otherwise I might have gone to church on the wrong Sunday.'"

We were laughing over this anecdote, when I heard a sudden commotion, and an S O S came from the kitchen. Would I come at once. Barbara—our youngest dog—in violent pursuit of a mouse had thrust her head into a big empty jar and failed to extricate it. I flung down my hymn-book and flew to the scene of the disaster, called for the coal hammer and freed the wriggling prisoner. But it was an anxious five minutes.

"Providential that we had not started for church," observed Dr. Henkle. "Your maids might not have known what to do—really quite providential."

That was one aspect, of course, of the incident, but what would have been Mrs. Pinkerton's view?

A telegram recalled Dr. Henkle to town on Monday morning, and in an incredibly short time he had packed himself into a taxi and we were waving "adieu" as it slowly retreated.

"A pleasant little man," I said. "One could not help liking him."

The Vicar made no direct reply. He was shivering, in a great coat with the collar turned up.

"I cannot think," he lamented, "why I caught this terrible cold!"

Barbara, rather subdued after the previous day's misadventure, had also come out to speed the departing guest. She pricked up her ears when Erasmus spoke, and glanced towards the gate. Would she have liked to have been able to make a suggestion?

CHAPTER IV

THE VISITATION OF THE TURNER PITTS

TO own a large house in London is to become the target of every enterprising relative and friend who desires to attend a wedding, sample a new play, buy a fur coat, or see a daughter off to school.

"I might as well run a private hotel, or, rather, a philanthropic institution," declared Maria Maltby, who suffers severely from a too comfortable residence in a central position. "I am inundated by specious postcards from people who ask to be put up for one night, and intend—as experience has taught me—to remain for two. Nothing will deter them except infectious illness or the sudden bolt of Edward and myself to the Continent—and a barrister can't bolt at a moment's notice. Besides, the only holidays Edward really cares about are our golfing week-ends at Cooden." Her plaintive tone induced the incredible suspicion that she would have sometimes preferred to go to Paris.

Our experiences almost presented a parallel to those of the Maltbys' when the tidings flew far afield of our arrival in our pleasant Sussex Vicarage. Acquaintances who had "forgotten" our address during our turbulent war days in Dover, or who had only remem-

bered it to send a carelessly-packed Christmas card, wrote on their best notepaper, with the envelopes meticulously adjusted, to congratulate us upon the bracing air, the ideal situation and spaciousness of our new home. Some of the writers pathetically intimated that they had been ordered country butter, or to recuperate in the south, after influenza; and these hints were hard to withstand. Others boldly announced that they were house-hunting at St. Leonards, brass-rubbing in Sussex churches, or in pursuit of a cook at Hailsham; might they make the Vicarage their headquarters during these respective expeditions?

But the majority of our would-be guests were individuals who happened to be staying somewhere in the county and wished to "look us up" while they were "so near." Most of them had as hazy an idea of the size and geography of Sussex as the crew of Columbus about the coast of America.

Among those who found our transfer to the Vicarage a sudden stimulus to laggard memories were Mrs. Turner Pitt and her daughter Julia. The former, in a preliminary missive, barren of any note of interrogation, stated that their visit to friends at Chichester would terminate the following week, when they would come over to see us, and stay "at any rate, one night."

It was in so remote an epoch that the Turner Pitts had last reminded us of their existence that, at first, the only clue to their identity was the biscuit box in the blue spare room, which they had bestowed upon us as a wedding present. This gift also came in useful to assist in the elucidation of a faint scratch in Mrs. Turner Pitt's signature which might indicate a connecting hyphen. Re-examination of the biscuit

box convinced me that it was unworthy of so distinguished an origin. I addressed my reply firmly and distinctly to "Mrs. T. Pitt." "That phrase, 'at any rate, one night,' sounds ominous," I remarked to Erasmus, my thoughts reverting uneasily to the trials of Maria Maltby. "I do not wish to be inhospitable, but with our present depleted staff these self-invited visitors are trying."

"The Pitts will give no trouble"—the Vicar traded cheerfully on his complete ignorance of their habits and customs—"Mrs. Pitt must be over seventy—probably it is merely an old-fashioned way of expressing herself—she is really a Victorian."

This was not reassuring. Tradition ascribed to the nomadic Victorians a reprehensible inclination to dig themselves in for at least a fortnight or three weeks. Was the "one night" the initial step towards a visitation of this kind?

Recollections had now revived of Mrs. Turner Pitt as a well-preserved widow, in what old Mrs. Pliny would have described as "comfortable circumstances," and of Julia as the amiable, handsome type of woman, whose perpetual spinsterhood puzzles the undiscerning. Both mother and daughter had, I recalled, sound business instincts and no sense of humour. Altogether, the outlook was rather gloomy.

Mrs. Pitt's advance message was succeeded by a short note from Julia informing us that they would try to arrive in time for luncheon. The "try" suggested that she had consulted the local time-tables, possibly even the map. She added that she would bring her pencils and paints; she found Sussex so "sketchable," and had nearly finished six water-colours of the Cathedral.

"They will get here in time, by hook or by crook," I said to Erasmus. "Mrs. Pitt would never waste money on meals. I fancy she is the kind of person who would be miserable if she accidentally bought a bad banana."

This diagnosis suggested a clue to Julia's unmarried state which had not occurred to me before. With human life seventy-five per cent. tragedy—as the pessimists assert—what sensible man would risk augmenting his real troubles by an alliance with a family whose head had so grotesque a conception of misfortune?

The pair, as I prophesied, arrived punctually the following Wednesday. They had endured an inconvenient early rising; but their goal had been attained, and they were all smiles and affability. Difficult indeed not to be in tune with one's surroundings on such a radiant day in spring. The laburnums and pink may lent gorgeous hues to the garden, the scent of the old-world currant trees was everywhere, and the sunshine, flickering gaily through the curved branches of the majestic monkey-tree, set the birds a-gossiping out of sheer light-heartedness.

"How happy you must be here!" murmured Julia, who had accompanied me into the garden after luncheon. She glanced at the bright scene with sentimental eyes. "This is perfect. I cannot imagine anything going wrong in such a paradise!"

An immediate comment upon this daring challenge to Fate was a loud cat-call from a little boy through the shrubbery, designed as an irritant for one of the dogs who was scampering about the lawn. Barbara, whose four feet are always breaking their own records, dashed after the offender, and his rapid retreat was equally astonishing.

"I should not have blamed the dog if she had bitten him," said Julia breathlessly—for we were among the "also rans"—when the two minutes' thrill was over. "He deserved it." "*You* might not blame her," I said, "but I'm afraid——"

"What are we doing this afternoon?" I was interrupted by the brisk voice of Mrs. Pitt, who had wandered out, through the French window, with the Vicar. "After a brief siesta I shall be ready to explore. No doubt you have something of interest to show us, even here. I find that seeing Sussex is a liberal education in many respects."

"Mama is quite a good walker," eagerly attested Julia, not wholly modernised by shingled grey hair and a rakish jumper. "She thinks nothing of two miles."

"In that case," said Erasmus, "we might walk to Standard Hill House, and I will explain the reason of the name and describe the Conqueror's probable march from Pevensey. In preparation, you might like to read a little booklet of mine on that momentous landing. I think there is a copy in your room."

"It is a capital idea," smiled Julia. "Mama often has some difficulty in dozing off. I could read to her some of the tit-bits—they would be sure to help."

Soon after three o'clock our pilgrimage began. The Vicar led the van, with Mrs. Pitt, who constantly turned round to attract her daughter's attention to objects of interest on the road—an old farmhouse, the forge, the post office, and, finally, the windmill.

Before this we made a brief halt, and the Vicar and myself acquitted ourselves deplorably under an able cross-examination by Mrs. Pitt as to its past career. We had to confess our ignorance of the

date when it was built, of the cause of its extreme dilapidation, and of the year when it had ceased to work.

"Henry Banister, our old gardener, told me," I said desperately, "that he remembered the mill grinding rough wheat—tail wheat, barley and oats for the pigs, but he was not certain of the date. He has usually a good memory."

"Julia keeps a diary," stated Mrs. Pitt, perhaps not intending—as I at first imagined—a reflection upon the veteran's more treacherous method of storing information. "She likes to jot down reliable details about ancient buildings, and so on. Since we came to Sussex she has often been up late at night making entries."

"Mama notices *everything*," murmured Julia proudly, as we resumed our journey, and I tried to blot out from my mental vision a horrid gap in her record of the day's itinerary. "Even during our bus ride, this morning, from Bexhill, she was constantly looking out of the window and making remarks."

"Then, of course, she noticed our famous stocks," I said. "They are in the centre of the little cluster of trees, facing the main road, just where you alighted from the bus."

"I—I am afraid we missed the stocks," admitted Julia, very properly ashamed. "At the moment Mama was going through her change—some of the conductors are so careless. Once, in Chichester, Mama gave the man a shilling in mistake for a halfpenny, and it upset all her accounts for the week."

Our leisurely progress brought us, at last, to our destination—the brow of the hill and the dignified old house.

"Here," said the Vicar, assuming the sole command of the expedition, "we have two magnificent views. On the right"—urging Mrs. Pitt, who was showing signs of fatigue, towards a gate—"we have a panorama, across the valley, of Ashburnham Park. The big house is hidden in a dell, but the vista of grand old trees is beautiful."

We gazed and admired, and then Erasmus steered us across the road towards another gate. "On this side," he pointed out, "we look over the countryside which William the Norman is said to have traversed on his way from Pevensey. He is supposed to have led some of his troops and camp followers by a roundabout route through Hailsham, Gardner Street and Boreham Street, across the fords, then climbed up the hill to the very spot where we are standing now."

"Mama ought to sit down and rest," interposed Julia, spreading out a light rug, with which she had dutifully provided herself, on a small hillock. Did she already recognise the mention of William's name as a signal—already familiar to me—for an outburst of eloquence?

"Here," continued Erasmus, frowning us back to attention, "students assert, William first raised his standard, a gorgeous banner given to him by the Pope, who further encouraged him by the gift of a hair of St. Peter."

"The Conqueror made the most of this religious backing," I suggested. "But his capacity as a business man was half the secret of his victory. As Professor Macary has observed, he conducted the invasion much on the lines of a joint stock company—he persuaded his friends to help him with men and arms, promising the spoils as dividends."

"He seems to have been a really sagacious personage," said Mrs. Pitt, whose animation was returning as her weariness abated. Her enthusiastic tone gave me the impression that, had their centuries chanced to coincide, a meeting between the Invader and herself would have been a thoroughly congenial affair.

"He always strikes me," I said, "as one of the most brilliant opportunists in history. I can never understand, by the way, why that word should be considered a term of reproach, manufactured to hurl at the politicians we dislike. After all, every successful man has been an opportunist, if it means seizing the vital moment to act. As to the Conqueror, he was in advance of his time. How he would have shone as a film producer, or a commercial traveller! And I seem to see his name on the wireless programme: 'Talk, 7.25, Advantages of the Channel Tunnel, William the Norman.'"

"If you must joke about a great man, Miranda, you might, at least, abstain from flippancy on Sussex soil," admonished the Vicar. "It is most unseemly."

"That old house would make a delightful sketch," put in Julia tactfully. "Has it been standing there ever since the Conquest?"

"No one knows its exact age," explained the Vicar, easily side-tracked. "The old Subsidy Rolls record that in 1326, 'Stephen-atte-Staundard' was the owner of land on this site. No mention is made, though, of a house. Probably it is of considerably later date. It was re-faced, we know, in 1776, and you see the three quaint old Puritan texts—one, 'Here we have no abidince.'"

"The Puritans were gloomy creatures," declared the widow, from her hillock, "with no idea of comfort,

and narrow minds." Was I wrong in deducing an unfavourable contrast with the more cheerful if less respectable characteristics of the Conqueror?

Presently we strolled slowly homewards, and I learned from Julia that their visit to Chichester had been mainly to mark time during the re-decoration of their house in the Midlands. She added that the workmen had already left.

Everything seemed to be passing off auspiciously, and it was not until at breakfast the next morning that my early forebodings anent the tenacity of the Turner Pitts took definite shape. Julia appeared alone, sweet and apologetic.

"Mama has one of her stiff necks—she is subject to them, you know—and is afraid she must have a tray upstairs. She will not be fit to travel to-day, trains are so draughty."

"I am so sorry—I mean about the stiff neck," I amended hastily. "But perhaps to-morrow—if she sat with her back to the engine——"

"We have never travelled on Fridays," said Julia firmly, "since I once lost my luggage on that day, coming home from school. Mama has never forgotten the worry or the sum she expended on wires and letters to the station."

"Very annoying," said Erasmus perfunctorily, busy with his letters.

"Mama thought,"—she paused, and wisely looked at the Vicar, "if you could keep us until Tuesday or Wednesday—our house would be better aired—the smell of paint is *so* unwholesome."

"By all means stay till Wednesday," said Erasmus, roused into genial interest. "We shall be delighted."

It was the response that I had expected. The Pitts were pleasant company, and, stranded in a notoriously dull neighbourhood, the Vicar naturally availed himself of any attractive society. Moreover, to me fell the task of manipulating the household machinery, of filling up gaps and, in these emergencies, of cajoling elusive Milly Jason into assistance in the kitchen. But the Rubicon was crossed, our defences broken down, the Pitts strongly entrenched.

Having achieved their ends, they settled down to be as friendly and unceremonious as though they had always been fixtures at the Vicarage. Julia catalogued the puddings her mother preferred, and the hours at which meals and baths were most beneficial. In the intervals she made sketches in the village, and in the evenings we inspected them and guessed what buildings they depicted. Haste, and an impressionist style tended to obscurity, but the amiable Julia was never angry when we blundered.

"Now Mama is better," she said on Monday—Mrs. Pitt's stiff neck had persisted all through Sunday—"I want to go to Lewes to-morrow to sketch Anne of Cleves' House, at Southover. I have always felt dreadfully sorry for that poor slighted woman. Henry treated her disgracefully."

"She was lucky to escape with her life," I maintained. "She might not have done so had it not been for her important relations. As it was, he pacified her with three Manors, one actually in this fair land of Sussex. If *that* could not console, nothing would."

"Yes, Sussex is quite nice. Mama and I both think so," said Julia politely.

"It is not certain, I believe, whether Anne ever occupied the house," I added.

"It does not matter. I shall imagine that she did, and it will be one more sketch. Poor Anne!" —Julia's eyes were quite moist—"I wonder if any other picture ever caused so much trouble as that misleading portrait of her by Holbein! As an artist myself, it makes one realise one's responsibilities." She looked quite anxious.

I begged her not to worry, urging that cathedrals, windmills and ancient houses were unlikely to provoke misunderstandings with crowned heads. "Anne was a stolid creature," I said, "she bored her husband, and that was more unpardonable than her awkwardness and lack of beauty. If she did not utilise her picturesque house at Southover it proves that her perceptions were slow indeed!"

"I do hope it will be fine to-morrow——" and Julia began to sharpen a pencil, thinking, I fancy, that I was a little hard on Anne and too complacent altogether about Sussex.

From the effusive letter indited to us by Mrs. Turner Pitt when she reached her evacuated and redecorated house, a postal order dropped out upon the table. I glanced at the note again for an explanation. "Please give the enclosed to your excellent maid," ran the postscript.

"We evidently under-estimated Mrs. Pitt's generosity," said the Vicar, much gratified.

"And exaggerated the bad banana," I said, laughing. I stopped abruptly. The soft wind through the open window had suddenly unfolded the flimsy strip of paper. "Pay. . . . one shilling and sixpence," Erasmus read aloud, over my shoulder.

CHAPTER V

THE EXPANSION OF MATILDA'S MIND

THE news that Matilda was to spend the last fortnight of her summer holidays at the Vicarage was hailed with satisfaction by every member of the household. Thirteen, talkative, and frisky, she could be relied upon to provide an effective anodyne to parochial cares; and the Vicar readily undertook the duty of selecting a train which would convey her, with reasonable swiftness, from Charing Cross to Sidley. Tancred, fifteen, good-natured, a "holiday boy" as well as a term pupil, during his parents' absence in India, volunteered again to essay the almost impossible task of teaching her tennis. It was an effort, I knew, foredoomed to failure, owing to her exasperating habit of staring at the sky, at the birds' nests under the eaves, at the dogs, at every passer-by, to and from the doors—at anything and everything—except the ball.

In the kitchen Matilda was immensely popular, any pleasant smell of baking cakes or confectionery drew her thither; and she liked to perch on the dresser and gossip to cook about the girls at school, confiding also fantastically laid plans for her own dazzling future. Personally, I was not unmoved by her undoubted charm; but, as a relative, I felt the necessity

of lending aid to prevent her ultimately landing in Society as an entirely frivolous young person.

"She is a nice child," said the Vicar, who shared my distrust of her avowed absorption in her studies, "cheery, and all that, but her mind sadly needs expanding."

Yet much had been done to supply her with exceptional mental stimulus: she was even being educated in Sussex, at East Grinstead. But this exhilarating influence and close contact with a county where history is writ large at almost every corner, and the collection of the clever is colossal, had not, so far, led to many encouraging comments in her school reports.

"Matilda does not appreciate her unique surroundings," regretted Erasmus. "She might just as well have gone to school at Margate. We must really take her seriously in hand during this coming visit. I shall give her history lessons in the morning, and in the afternoon you and Tancred must take her to museums and show places in the neighbourhood."

"We might ask her questions, too, suddenly, at meals," I said, mindful of an alarming plan adopted for my benefit in the remote past—"tiresome questions, such as, How old is Pevensey Castle? What is a hammer pond? Who is Hilaire Belloc?"

"And where is Catsfield?" put in Tancred, glad no doubt, to be able to base this addition on first-hand information.

"Catsfield," said the Vicar, trying to be patient, "is a pretty village—a model village, as we all know. But it has no claims to veneration from an antiquarian standpoint, possessing neither a Roman camp nor mediæval ruins. I beg of you, Tancred, not further to confuse Matilda's mind with irrelevant

queries of this kind. But the original idea, sensibly worked out, is a good one, and ought to be advantageous to you, also. I fear your craving for useful information is as meagre as Matilda's."

"Yes, sir, I know I am a duffer. About Catsfield, though—isn't it famous for its flower show? Matilda doesn't care about museums, unless they have mummies or bottled snakes—she told me so. But I thought, perhaps, we might go in for the wild flowers competition. . . ."

He stopped abruptly, for Erasmus, affecting not to hear, was already in the hall, on the way to his sanctum. There are some conversational crises best met by a stony silence and a rapid retreat.

Matilda was allowed to simmer down after her arrival in exuberant spirits, before any intimation was given her of the Vicar's scheme to accelerate her intellectual progress. It was on her second morning, after breakfast, that I introduced the subject, quite naturally, as it happened. She came up to me, sleek and self-complacent, in a becoming striped frock—her "clothes sense" is more than adequately developed—and, with a bland smile, heavily deposited an imposing volume on my writing-table. The title, *Unknown Sussex*, confronted me in large letters, and taken in conjunction with Matilda, had an ominous significance.

"For you," she said graciously. I looked at her enquiringly. It was unlike Matilda to run to such expense on my account. The boot was usually on the other foot, to put it bluntly. "It is too stodgy for me," she explained. "Daddy would buy it instead of the detective story I wanted—he's so old-fashioned. As if I wasn't perfectly *used* to murders! Look what

lots of them there are in history! We did the little Princes smothered in the Tower, last term—absolutely horrid! But when someone shoots someone in a story-book, and you don't know who did it, and—and——"

"Matilda," I said, quelling her rising excitement, "you have yet to learn that real murders in history and imaginary ones in story-books are on entirely different planes. Talking of history, by the way, your cousin Erasmus wishes you to read carefully through the reign of Henry III, with special attention to the battle of Lewes, and, at eleven, you are to go to his study to be examined. Then, this afternoon, I shall take you to see Herstmonceux Castle."

Matilda—as her father modestly said, is "not a bad-looking kid," and she can be most speciously ingratiating. Unhappily, like the majority of the rising generation, she is no respecter of persons. She opened a pair of defiant blue eyes and tossed her head. "History in the hols? No, thank you! And I can't go to fuggy old Herstmonceux, because Tancred has booked me to play tennis at three, and he would be frightfully disappointed." She paused and reddened, realising, I fancy, that even her audacious glibness had failed to permeate this latter statement with the ring of truth. She glanced round the room for inspiration, and found it in a fruit dish on the sideboard. "Are those gooseberries ripe?" She strolled across and ascertained their condition by repeated experiment.

"This evasion," I said, "is foolish. Your mind is deplorably empty, and we are determined that you shall not miss this grand opportunity of seeing Sussex and learning something of its stirring history. Sussex . . ."

Matilda swung round. "Oh!" she cried, "are *you* going to ram it in, too?" She flung herself, in extreme agitation, into an armchair, which promptly groaned remonstrance. "At school, they are always at it. It is Sussex this, and Sussex that, all day long. We have to write essays about the battle of Hastings, and poems about the Downs. Once I wrote a poem about Malta instead"—she had paid one ineffaceable visit to that gay island—"and there *was* a row!" She giggled unrepentantly at the recollection. "Malta is a place you *can* write poems about. Why does everyone make this fuss about Sussex? One of the girls in my form, Doris Hale, was born at Bognor, and the way she swanks about it! Crowds of people are born in Bognor, I daresay— they can't help it, poor things! I'm glad I wasn't. Of course, your garden is top-hole"—she threw me an appeasing smile—"but I think most of Sussex is bare and draughty, not a bit better than any other old county, and not a patch on Malta! So there!" She subsided into the chair with this final outburst of protest.

For a moment, there was an awful stillness. Then I started at the sound of a distant rumble. Was the earth opening to swallow us up—or, at any rate, to swallow up Matilda? The noise soon translated itself into cook's liberal replenishment of the kitchen fire, and I breathed again. I was thankful that the Vicar had been spared this heresy; prolonged hay-fever debilitates the nerves. I saw that Tancred had now entered, and was standing by the door. Was it only the strong sunlight that made him look so pale? He must have heard Matilda's concluding words.

"What you have just said, Matilda"—I resolved to temper judgment with mercy—"is the result of

sheer prejudice. You are at school in Sussex, and aware that you are a complete fiasco as a scholar. This is an explanation but no excuse for your extraordinary and unwarrantable sentiments. Find a history book for her, at once, please, Tancred, and be ready, both of you, to accompany me to Herstmonceux at half past-two."

What Tancred said to soften the situation, or what happened when they later mounted to the study, I do not know. At luncheon, Matilda was primed with details of the battle of Lewes, and Tancred remarked that if that event led to the institution of Parliaments, as the historian said, it just showed what a go-ahead corner of England Sussex always was. The morning tuition had apparently made a successful start.

I gathered that Tancred's noble offer to share the manipulation of his camera had reconciled Matilda to the afternoon expedition; and, *en route*, when they were not peering into the hedges to detect wild flowers —the Catsfield Show being a fixed objective—they docilely received the few instructive items of information which I thrust upon them.

"Herstmonceux Castle," I said, "is one of the oldest brick buildings in the country, and was erected in 1443. A manor house occupied the site before that, dating from the Conquest."

"William the Conqueror, 1066," said Matilda easily. "Did you think I didn't know that? Oh, Tancred, *do* look!—those dinky yellow flowers—aren't they . . ." They both craned out of the car and began a brisk botanical skirmish.

"In the seventeenth century," I continued—"if either of you fall out, be it on your own heads—in the seventeenth century the Dacres owned the Castle,

and in connection with them a tragic episode occurred. One night the grandson of the first Lord Dacre ventured on to the estate of his neighbours, the Pelhams, of Horselunges, Hellingly. A fray followed, and one of the Pelham party was seriously injured, and afterwards died. For this, young Dacre was held responsible—rather unfairly, many of his contemporaries thought—and was executed at Tyburn."

"Those were the good old times," remarked Tancred, with unwonted sarcasm. "Well, here we are," as the car stopped. "I shall take the first snap; that archway is jolly fine."

"Why, the Castle has been done up!" exclaimed Matilda, with well simulated indignation, as we advanced. "Miss Bond—she is one of our mistresses —says that people who do up ancient ruins are Gaths and Vindals."

"Not always," I demurred, forbearing, at the moment, to edit the "Gaths and Vindals." "In this instance, the restoration has been most skilfully and elaborately carried out, and the Castle is habitable."

Baulked here, Matilda's gaze travelled in search of further material for criticism. "Why isn't there any water in the moat?" she demanded, seizing with avidity upon this flaw.

"Once, long ago, the sea flooded it," I said—"at least so the story goes. Then, when it was eventually left high and dry, it gradually filled up. The present owner had it cleared out, but it remains, as you see, only the mockery of a moat."

We wandered on into the lovely gardens, and Matilda condescended to admire the rich banks of colour and the smooth lawns.

"This is where the fairies play," she said, her eyes sparkling, "and they sleep over there, under those blue bushes. I wish I was a fairy!"

This was exactly like Matilda. Fairies,who, as the Vicar pointed out, are problematical creatures of doubtful utility, intrigued her, while Roman soldiers and other participants in the great deeds of history left her cold.

"Fairies don't weigh eight stone," remarked Tancred unkindly. "Come along, Matilda, you may take some photographs now. Only, for goodness' sake, do try and get them straight." Still Matilda lingered. She looked dreamy, I fancied, impressed. Did she, after all, appreciate the grandeur and enchantment of the old-world Castle, in its sunlit setting? Was her fallow mind already beginning to expand? My hopes ran high.

She slipped her arm through mine. "Cousin Miranda," she said softly, "I've been wondering if there's a tea-place anywhere here?"

Matilda's visit had proceeded midway to completion, and the Catsfield Flower Show—round which all her ambitions centred—was but two days distant, when at luncheon on Monday, Tancred unexpectedly assumed the rôle of Grand Inquisitor. He had been gallantly struggling all the morning to concentrate Matilda's eyes upon the tennis ball; their roving propensities had been more conspicuous than ever, and the day was exceedingly warm. Even Tancred's amiability has its limits of elasticity, and I could sympathise with his evident resolve that a punishment should be fitted to the crime.

"Matilda," he said, "here is a question for you: What did Dr. Johnson say about Brighton?"

"You had better ask her first," suggested the Vicar, "who Dr. Johnson was."

Matilda roused herself reluctantly from an intent contemplation of the door which was due to open to admit the entrance of the meat. Would it be, as she suspected, mince, which she detested, or roast lamb, in which she gloried? It was an agonising juncture of suspense.

"Johnson? Johnson?" She hesitated, and fidgeted with a spoon. "Oh, I know—the man who used to pick up orange-peel in the streets and wrote pamphlets in his spare time."

"That is exactly the haphazard description I should anticipate from you, Matilda," observed the Vicar, equally morose at the approach of mince. "You might, with more accuracy, reverse the division of the famous philosopher's day's work."

"But what did he say about Brighton?" persisted Tancred, who could not have understood that the answer was playing into Matilda's hands.

"I don't know—something nasty, I daresay." She was staring with aversion at her plate. Had its contents guided her in the choice of an adjective?

Tancred nodded. "He said that if a man was so bored that he wanted to hang himself, he couldn't do it, for there wasn't a single tree!"

Matilda smiled superiorly. "If I was as fed up as all that, I should manage with a telegraph pole," she said loftily. "Though I don't see why anyone should be more bored in Brighton than anywhere else in Sussex!"

To do Matilda justice, I do not think she fully grasped the implication of what seemed to be a dastardly innuendo.

"To-morrow morning," said Erasmus, refusing to debate the point, "you shall have a lesson in English literature, and, incidentally, learn why telegraph poles were not available alternatives for the Brightonians of Dr. Johnson's day. Your appalling ignorance——"

"'Tuesday, 10.45. Mr. Pett to see me about the dilapidations.'" Matilda seemed to be quoting from some entry. "I saw that note on the study mantelpiece yesterday. Had you forgotten, Cousin Erasmus? And Wednesday morning we have to take our wild flowers to Catsfield. 'All exhibits to be staged by ten o'clock.'" She was evidently quoting again. "It will have to be Thursday," and she smiled the triumphant smile of one who has, at least, deferred the evil day.

It was Matilda herself who revived the subject of Brighton, while we were sitting near the tennis lawn that afternoon, and I was watching Tancred's vigorous single with a friend. Matilda, in her deck-chair, was engrossed in a book, and her silence and preoccupation presently struck me as peculiar.

"What have you got there?" I demanded.

"Black's *Watering Places*." She held up a shabby, green volume. "I dug it out when I was browsing about the box-room just now. The date is 1877, and some of the bits about Sussex are lovely. Listen to this about Brighton: 'The Pavilion ceased to be a Royal residence when Queen Victoria, offended by the ill-manners of the Brighton people, shut it up and dismantled it.' Ill-manners! They made faces at her, I s'pose. Pretty disgraceful, I consider." She feigned to be deeply shocked. "And here is another bit. 'The sea has been the town's great

destroyer. In 1665, it swept away, at one stroke, twenty-two human dwellings.' Cousin Miranda, what are *in*human dwellings?"

I laughed. "If you come for a walk with me to-morrow I will show you several houses ugly enough to deserve that label. We need not go far."

"I thought perhaps it meant pigsties, or cages at the Zoo." She was still turning over the leaves. "The best bit of all is about Bognor. I am going to copy it out for Doris. Bognor—Bognor—here we are—'This once favourite abode of Royalty' . . ."

(How history repeats itself!) A tennis ball crashed near us. Then Matilda started again. "'This once favourite abode of Royalty is a thorough specimen of a respectable watering-place.' Respectable! Doris won't like *that!* She *will* be wild. I'll get a pencil and paper now." She ran off towards the house, flinging the book upon the grass. I waited until she was out of sight, then picked it up, and hurried in, too, by another door. There would be a hue and cry, but my duty was plain. What Mr. Black, whose descriptive powers were obviously of the feeblest order, said—or left unsaid—about Eastbourne, Worthing, Hastings, and St. Leonards, in Matilda's prejudiced condition, it was not safe to leave her to find out.

The Catsfield Flower Show proved once again a placid, pleasing function. The potatoes and marrows were as prodigious, the tea as good and unbelievably cheap, as on each previous occasion. The same people were there; the band, after the manner of all bands, was again briefly joyous and lingeringly restful; the procession that circled the exhibits tent, as long and as wonderingly admiring as ever.

Matilda professed content at achieving a second prize, and spent a blissful hour, hovering round the wild flowers section, listening to the remarks thereon of the visitors. Their encomiums of her bunch, which she collected and conveyed afterwards to Tancred, who was playing in the tennis tournament, appeared to be couched in terms of eulogy which even the inventor of a new orchid might have deemed extravagant.

We had to depute Tancred to receive the award; for after looking on at the tennis for a short time, Matilda had a violent access of toothache, and urged me to take her home.

"It is a pity you do not like games," I said unsympathetically, when, at long last, we climbed into a bus. "You will be dreadfully out of things when you grow up."

Matilda's hand, which had been tenderly pressing her right cheek, dropped to her side. She looked at me and smiled sweetly. "I shall be all right. I shall just lean back gracefully, in a low chair, and dozens of young men will roll up to talk to me. Don't you worry."

Cook told me, after Matilda's departure, that, among her many confidences, was her decision either to become a Member of Parliament or marry a millionaire. No sane constituency would ever nominate her, but her guile might entangle a susceptible modern Crœsus. In that event, our anxieties are superfluous. If there is one thing that matters less than another about a millionaire's wife it is, I fancy, the expansion of her mind.

CHAPTER VI

THE CURIOUS CASE OF CANON PLEDGER

THERE are some people who, through a fortunate combination of circumstances, seem to move through life on oiled wheels. The slings and darts of cruel Fate, which tease and torment the average mortal, hurtle harmlessly past them. Their investments are always wise; they can eat almost anything; their sons marry heiresses; their admirable servants are glued to their posts. Sometimes, these favoured ones, passing beyond the stage of commonplace comfort, win academical, or other laurels, and become distinguished. Once a "silver-spoon" person of this type lightly mounts the first rung of Fame's ladder his steady ascent is usually assured. Possibly, he may even reach the giddy apex, there to balance with dignity and ease.

That such a climax had not crowned the smooth career of Canon Pledger perplexed his many friends. By middle age he ought to have worn lawn sleeves and an Episcopal apron with the insignia of an Archbishop looming on the distant horizon. Everybody said so—or nearly everybody, for there is a section in the Church Militant whose unwritten motto, *Nil admirari*, extended even to Canon Pledger. Instead of joining the Bishops, at forty-eight he had accepted

a Residentiary Canonry, in the north, and, as time went on his name was less and less prominently put forward when speculation was rife concerning a vacant see.

Both the Vicar and myself were extremely interested in the curious case of Canon Pledger, whom we had met at a convention in Dover. Why, we asked ourselves, had the powers who pick out Bishops, usually with such discrimination, neglected so promising a candidate? It was really very strange.

A scholar of repute, who had acquitted himself brilliantly at Oxford, he was also the author of more than one outstanding book, and a preacher of renown, who made the frivolous fidget nervously and induced the more serious to reconsider the propriety of contributing only sixpence towards the offertory. His wife united influential relations with a remarkable knack of saying the right thing to mixed assemblies of women. Dr. Bibsberry, a Sussex friend, who knew the Canon well, told us that he possessed the phenomenal tact which coaxes large subscriptions for tottering cathedrals from hard-headed business men, and soothes the religious anxieties of elderly ladies without directly explaining anything. The word "Modernist," said Dr. Bibsberry, made the Canon look so pained that no kind-hearted acquaintance ever mentioned it twice in his hearing, while, about the one or two representatives of that party who had crept into the Episcopal fold, he preserved a charitable silence. Crockford informed us that he had been ordained at Chichester, and Dr. Bibsberry added the information that the Canon's preparatory school had been at Hastings, and that he invariably came to Sussex to recruit after his annual influenza.

There appeared to be nothing that a man could do to deserve high preferment which Canon Pledger had left undone.

"I cannot understand it," said the Vicar, when once again the dwindling group of Pledgerites had suffered a reverse. "He has all the big guns."

"There must be something," I maintained. "Perhaps he has a bad temper, or an eccentric hobby, like old Archdeacon Mollybar, who used to bring handfuls of bees out of his pocket, and knew more about hives than even Maeterlinck."

"Nonsense! Canon Pledger has neither a bee in his pocket, nor in his bonnet. He may have refused that Bishopric, it is one of minor importance."

But neither of us really believed that he would commit this indiscretion. There are such aids as stepping stones in the clerical stream.

I ascertained afterwards, from *Who's Who*—a volume which, showing an odd disregard of vital details, omitted to mention his Hastings school—that Canon Pledger played golf and collected coloured prints—sound hobbies of the utmost respectability. Altogether, his position seemed to be impregnable; and the mystery deepened.

It was soon after this that we encountered the Canon, for the second time, on this occasion at the Eastbourne Congress. He remembered us at once, and, without any obvious effort, detached himself from a couple of "useful" people—a famous Dean and an Archbishop's Chaplain. Did this, I wondered, indicate despair, or merely a noble renunciation of opportunities? At any rate, he greeted us with a friendly smile, and reminded Erasmus that he had known his father in Birmingham, years before. On

the strength of this former association we had tea together, and, for nearly half an hour, I was able to study Canon Pledger at close quarters.

He was a tall, spare man, with a "presence," and an almost royal air of spick and spanness. He had an agreeable though slightly ponderous manner, and was, apparently, unsoured by the mirage of Episcopal honours which so frequently deceived him.

"I am always glad," he said pleasantly, towards the end of tea, "to find an excuse to visit your delightful county. I have explored Sussex pretty thoroughly, yet there is always something fresh, and its interest seems inexhaustible. Bibsberry was telling me this morning about the gypsum mines at Netherfield—a flourishing industry, I understand. I must run over there some day. Then the scenery of Sussex is hard to equal. Take the view from Beachy Head—so entrancing in this glorious sunshine; or the one from Dallington. 'Superb' is the only adequate description."

I listened with increasing amazement, more puzzled than ever. That a man of such discernment who talked about Sussex in this strain should be indefinitely stranded in a northern desert was inexplicable, scandalous—indeed, shameful.

"Talking of Beachy Head," he continued, "do you know anything about a cave under the cliffs, which an old guide-book tells me was hollowed out 'by a benevolent clergyman,' for the benefit of shipwrecked people, and is called 'Parson Darby's Hole'? Is it still accessible?"

Hastily turning the plate of cakes so that a fascinating pink meringue confronted and distracted Erasmus, I suggested that the boatmen would, no

doubt, direct his investigations. We might be newcomers to Sussex—we had only been five years at the Vicarage; we might never have heard of Parson Darby, or his Hole; but a meteoric stranger from the north must not be permitted to plumb the depths of our ignorance.

The Canon, realising, I fancy, that the cave had fallen flat, tactfully turned the conversation to the village. Was it, he inquired, picturesque?

"Once, perhaps," I said. "Now it grows more ordinary every year. As elsewhere, everything is sacrificed to the convenience of the motorist. Nothing is sacred, even in Sussex, to this engine-obsessed, movement-mad generation. Chauffeurs must be able to see round corners, and as a pedestrian myself, I am glad, of course, when they are able to do so!"

"Quite so," murmured Canon Pledger, not smiling; "Quite so. Unobscured visibility is essential on the roads to-day." The heavy poly-syllables gave me the fleeting impression that he had said something rather clever. "I sometimes think," he added impressively, "that it will need the pen of a Dante to describe the highways of England a hundred years hence."

"Our windmill goes next," lamented Erasmus. "Not that it affects the motorist—it is reported to be dangerous. One by one the old Sussex windmills vanish. What a pity it is!"

"They might be a menace to the airman," pointed out Canon Pledger; "his convenience must be studied next." He finished a dry, ascetic looking biscuit and rose. "I should like to see your church when I am again in this neighbourhood. Unfortunately, I leave to-morrow, so it must be a pleasure postponed."

It was arranged that he would let us know when another trip Sussex-wards was imminent; and, shaking hands with us, he responded to a welcoming nod from Mrs. St. Levant—a local member of the Church Assembly, who, with her daughter, was seated at an adjacent table. I was glad that the Canon would not spend a wholly unprofitable tea hour. I remembered that the morning paper had announced the impending resignation of the aged Bishop of Arkborough.

A considerable time elapsed before we received Canon Pledger's promised intimation of his proximity. But a few weeks ago he wrote to us from "The Jaspers," at Ore, inquiring if he might motor over to see us two days later. He apologised for the shortness of the notice, and I gathered that his sojourn at "The Jaspers," where he was staying with Lord Fritterton, a cousin of his wife's, had been unexpectedly curtailed. "Ask him to stay the night," I said to the Vicar; and this, on a courteous postcard, he agreed to do.

I was eager to meet him again, for my interest in his case had recently been accentuated by a new trend in the situation. He had been offered the Colonial Bishopric of Quackaloo—an offer which the Pledgerites, seething with indignation, described as adding insult to injury. Was it not common knowledge that a Colonial Bishop was scarcely the equivalent of an English Dean, and that Quackaloo was an insalubrious and unmanageable island? The Canon himself, coldly declining Quackaloo, had remained calm and reserved; but it was significant that he had immediately hastened south and sought the reviving atmosphere and influences of Sussex. What could be the flaw, I wondered, that rendered

him unsuitable for Arkborough and fitted him for exile in an uncongenial region of blacks and whirlwinds?

I went into the drawing-room to receive him, on the following Thursday afternoon, determined, before his twelve hours' visit was completed, to find out.

He was standing by the window when I entered, spruce and spare, as of yore, unmarked, save for a slightly thinner thatch, by the affront of Quackaloo.

"I am admiring your winter garden," he said. "The monkey-tree and the greenery of the shrubs and rhododendrons give an illusion of perpetual summer—almost of tropical warmth—which must be very cheering."

The conversational ball, thus deftly kicked off, was not suffered to bounce far.

Puffed up by her recent admission to the Tail Waggers' Club, keen to exhibit her badge, Flash put a demonstrative paw on the Canon's perfectly brushed coat. Waving her off—which astonished her very much—he hastily retreated to the hearthrug, and viewed her from afar with the gloomy disfavour one might mete out to an angry lion lurking behind a bush.

"Come here, Flash," I called, "you naughty dog!" Canon Pledger was carefully removing two white hairs from his impeccable garment. "I am so sorry—I forget that other people may not like dogs as much as I do."

"Dogs," he began sententiously, and I knew exactly what he was going to say—"dogs are very well in their proper places"—no doubt, in his estimation, sun-grilled or ice-cold kennels, near back doors, scar-

ing away stray specimens of the drifting unemployed. "My wife," he added, "has a Pekingese." The expression of animosity with which he had surveyed poor Flash, deepened, and I looked at him in silence, certain that I had discovered one unpardonable kink. He was anti-dog! Here was illumination indeed! Would the powers who pick out Bishops dare to recommend such a man, particularly in these times of crisis in the Church? Would any Monarch, at the head of a dog-loving nation, sanction such an appointment? Could the British public be persuaded to accept Mrs. Pledger's Pekingese in extenuation of the Canon's attitude? Would the promoters of the Tail Waggers' Club, and its thirty thousand four-legged members, stand tamely by and raise no protesting howl?

It was all, I told myself, most unlikely. But evidence of another serious defect was soon to accumulate.

The Vicar's entrance had created a diversion, and we had drawn our chairs nearer to the fire, when Canon Pledger abruptly introduced the subject of his stay at Ore.

"I have had rather a trying experience," he said. "Lady Fritterton has been learning to fly, as, probably, you know—her photograph has been in all the papers—and, as a result, her devoted husband became a nervous wreck. His London doctor promptly ordered him to Sussex; in fact, threatened to throw up the case unless he went at once. Edmund had mentioned Scarborough, an invalid's queer fancy. In the end he took a house at Ore. It was the best he could do, though Dr. Simkins was not quite pleased. But all the houses round Bognor are snapped up for years to come."

I felt that this was merely the prelude to the recital of some real vicissitudes. "Colonel Marke was telling me about Lord Fritterton the other day," I dashed in. "He said his mind was quite unhinged and that he was doing the most extraordinary things—making civil remarks about the Government, returning his neighbours' calls, refusing to play bridge for money on Sundays, and sending his servants to church."

"It is quite true about the servants, and, last Monday, they all left, complaining that the evening sermon was too long." The Canon sighed. Could he have been the over-zealous preacher? "Since then, we have had to wash up, and so on. I broke a vegetable dish on Tuesday night. Edmund seemed vexed, but 'unhinged' is a cruel exaggeration. He is changed certainly—that is the word—changed, and for the better, but unhinged, no."

There was not the ghost or the glimmer of a smile on the Canon's long, spare face. It was intensely grave, almost distressed. "Unhinged," I said hastily —Erasmus was frowning at me—"was Colonel Marke's expression, not mine. He was only joking."

But well I knew now that though Colonel Marke might jest and I might laugh, it would avail nothing. Canon Pledger would listen to us, slightly shocked, ponderous, profound, entirely unamused. I rang the bell for tea, feeling like a struggler with a cross-word puzzle who, suddenly inspired, fills up the final gap.

"After tea," intervened the Vicar, aware, I think, that Lord Fritterton was exhausted as a theme, "we will visit the church, and then I should like to show you Frickley Hollow, one of our local beauty spots."

It was later in the day, when we were descending the hill on our way to Frickley Hollow, that we met

Mrs. Ferrars, and the Canon's solemnity was again severely tested. We had been reading the notice of a political meeting, in a shop window, and it suggested a safe topic for our brief colloquy with Mrs. Ferrars—a handsome, capable widow, one of the leaders of village opinion.

"How is the Liberal Association progressing?" I asked. I was interested, for I knew that Mrs. Ferrars had become a member and that its originator and main prop had recently left the neighbourhood.

"Well, I don't hear much about it now," she admitted. "Luckily, I joined the Conservative Association at the same time, so I've got something to fall back upon." She paused and blushed. "You are laughing at me." I could not help it, and in a moment Mrs. Ferrars was laughing too.

Canon Pledger did not laugh or even smile.

"Poor soul!" he said sadly, when Mrs. Ferrars had hurried on, "what a pitiable confusion of ideas! I have always thought that extending the franchise to women was a wise concession; but when one realises that the fate of our great Empire depends upon the caprice——"

"That is the beginning of Frickley Hollow," said Erasmus firmly, pointing with his stick. And whether Canon Pledger wanted to or not he had to gaze and admire. When the Vicar escorts pilgrims to "see Sussex," he will, most properly, endure no shilly shallyings or distractions. . . .

"Not only is he anti-dog, and that is bad enough," I said to Erasmus, when the Canon's car had hooted its farewell outside the gate—"he has no sense of humour. His case was hopeless from the first. Have not our Bishops, ever since the days of 'Soapy Sam,'

of Oxford, been famous for their wit? Without it, how could they keep the Diocese together, get in the 'Quotas,' preside at stodgy meetings and justify their presence at smart dinners? A Bishop who could not laugh at *Punch !*—he is unthinkable! What use would the Bright Young People have for him? They have not too much use for bishops as it is."

"Utterly ridiculous and preposterous!" said Erasmus. He had sat up till midnight, assisting to correct the proofs of the Canon's latest book—a short but erudite volume, "Saints of Sussex"—and looked tired. "Bibsberry says that it is simply and solely due to his Moderate views. It is the Extremists who succeed. Pledger accepts the Pauline doctrine too literally. His moderation has been fatal."

Dr. Bibsberry and Erasmus may diagnose the curious case of Canon Pledger as they please; I shall retain my own opinions. In Quackaloo, his frightful failings might not jar; but here I have never met a Bishop who would not give good Flash a genial greeting, or who lacked the saving gift, and I hope I never shall!

CHAPTER VII

THE SUN-BASKERS

"IT is my wish that she shall be useful in the house," said Mynheer Hoote, laboriously producing every word, "sometimes, in the kitchen. In Holland, except the Princess Juliana, who has sense, the young would dance all day. By my children it shall not so be done."

"Yes, yes, papa—she has brought an apron—but this is holidays," intervened Jevrouw Hoote, sprightly and vivacious, her Dutch solidity leavened—as she explained—by a French mother. "In the kitchen, a little, and often, on the tennis court, in the sun. You have much sun here, is it not?"

It was impish of Phœbus, who, since dawn, had distinguished himself as a first-class performer, to choose this crucial moment to skulk behind a passing cloud.

"This county is not called 'Sunny Sussex' without good reason," asserted the Vicar, defying the sun's malice. "Sometimes the heat is so intense here that even the ponds and wells are dried up."

"So, so," murmured Mynheer Hoote, blinking dubiously at the sky.

"Our water is from the main, not from wells," I hastened to erase a look of slight uneasiness from

Jevrouw Hoote's animated face, "the very best Sussex water, unrivalled in purity throughout the kingdom, the same that is supplied to your Bexhill hotel." It is necessary to be emphatic with the inquisitive foreigner.

"I remarked to you, papa, at dinner last night, that the water looked good," Jevrouw Hoote reminded her husband. I inferred that she had not pressed her investigations beyond the point of inspection. "Cornelia drinks water," she added, confirming this surmise.

Negotiations for her daughter's six weeks' visit to the Vicarage were nearing conclusion and only needed careful diplomacy to clinch them.

"Cornelia will like to bathe often in the sea," said her father, refusing to let the topic of conversation become like America, quite dry. "Doubtless, care will be taken that she does not drown."

"Such vigilance is exercised at the Bexhill bathing stations, with alert attendants always at hand, that the bathing is ideally safe." Really, the Vicar was doing extremely well. I determined to back him up.

"Perhaps," I suggested, "you have seen the advertisement, 'You can't be dull at Brighton'? Another might run, with equal force, 'You can't drown at Bexhill.'"

"It is good," commented Mynheer Hoote, evidently awed by this picture of a wave-controlled bathing Utopia. He brightened as the sun slowly re-appeared, and then relapsed into an intent study of a pink azalea immediately in front of him. Was he counting its blossoms as a test of Sussex fertility, or weighing its merits as a substitute for the eternal tulip?

"At breakfast, may she have a daily boiled egg" —Jevrouw Hoote proceeded briskly with business— "also some fruit. She will not tire, as you may think, of the daily egg, and the doctor has advised it. Not that she is ill; only, after the appendicitis of last year, there must be care. Above all, no pastry or potatoes. In Holland the tendency is to grow too fat. I myself struggle continually"—glancing at her, I could understand that—"but, for the young girl, it is disaster. The modish silhouette demands slimness. So you will be sure, no pastry."

Hitherto Cornelia, the pivot of the morning's talk, had sat silently upon the sofa, observant, extremely smart, round of face and spectacles, almost pretty. In vain had Miss Kinnder—a friend who was spending the summer at the Vicarage—plied her with timid questions. Did she like country walks? There were picturesque lanes, leading from the village to Ashburnham. Had she been to Hastings, and explored the Castle? Cornelia had replied in shy monosyllables, apparently uninterested. But now she woke up, glanced across mischievously at me, and laughed.

"I have tasted the English tarts," she said.

Appreciation was written upon her smiling face. She intended to taste them again! The fear shot through me, and was amply justified by subsequent events.

"A French boy is coming to-morrow," I remembered to announce, as Jevrouw Hoote shook her head at her daughter. "It will not matter, I suppose? He is only sixteen."

"Cornelia is nineteen, and will know how to treat a little French boy of that age," her mother assured me complacently. "She has been about the world

—to the Swiss sports this year—and has had already many admirers. The little French boy, doubtless, plays the tennis and walks. They will amuse each other."

"Jules' father," put in Erasmus, "has specially asked that he shall be much out of doors, in the sun, and urged to exert himself."

I was amazed at this extraordinary similarity of aims on the part of the parents of two continental visitors. It was most unusual; and Jevrouw Hoote's sweet reasonableness inspired me with the hope that, even should the sun fail to come fully up to expectations, she would be merciful.

"All, then, is agreeably arranged," she said, putting on her expensive gloves. "Yet there is still one request. We remain in your country another day —Papa found a restaurant, yesterday, for luncheon, which pleased him. Is there any place of interest we should visit here, so that we may speak of it to our friends in Amsterdam? We have already been to Woolworth's . . ." She checked herself. Cornelia had laughed again.

I was not angry with Jervouw Hoote; I was sorry for her, as one would be for any well-meaning person in whom some deplorable abyss of ignorance is suddenly revealed. "*Any* place of interest"! In *Sussex!* and, then, the final outrage to our feelings, the mention of that vast and glittering store! She had damaged, if not irretrievably destroyed, my conception of the Dutch as a conspicuously cultured people.

Meanwhile Erasmus, stifling his emotion, was pouring out a torrent of information in which, I soon perceived, the senior Hootes were totally submerged. I caught the inevitable phrase. "William the Norman," plunged in, and rescued them.

"Yes, you must go to Battle Abbey to-morrow," I insisted. "It is impossible for you to leave Sussex without seeing that historic pile. Of the thousands of American visitors to this country every year, only about a dozen return home without beholding it. The reason why the Americans are so often cross with us is simply this—they cannot buy Battle Abbey!"

I explained how it might be easily attained by bus, and that the homeward journey would land them almost at the door of the Café Imperial.

"We take Cornelia with us to see this worthy monument of your great nation," said Mynheer Hoote graciously" (the English bus routes were, indeed, arranged with marvellous sagacity!), "calling for her early, and returning her at night, while you receive, and fit in, the little French boy."

Our two young foreign visitors met, for the first time, at supper on the following night, when they critically examined each other across the table as dogs, destined to be "bench" neighbours at a show, might do. The "little French boy" proved to be a long, reedy youth, sharp of eye, with a rather disquieting air of extreme sophistication and a complexion much in need of the sun. Evidence of the inertia at which his father had hinted was soon forthcoming.

He played tennis? Of course. This in answer to a question from Cornelia. But he preferred, for the present, to rest in the garden. He had toiled much at school in Paris, and was fatigued.

"You are lazy," summed up Cornelia scornfully. "We cannot, all the day, sit and bake in the sun."

"*Bask* in the sun," I amended.

"Thank you, Madame"—Cornelia had a charming smile—"we cannot, all the day, sit and bask in the sun. There is much to see and do here."

Already she had grasped that! Or had she arrived primed with the knowledge—I remembered the laugh that her unhappy mother's allusion to Woolworth's had evoked—and was Holland really a country where worth-while information was imparted to the young generation?

"Did you enjoy the Abbey?" inquired Miss Kinnder, who, as a persistent catechist, was an invaluable stimulus to halting conversation.

"It is a fine building," replied Cornelia, "though we have as good in Holland, and they are not used for schools. It is agreeable for the students, doubtless, but a strange use for a house of so great history. The gardens are very beautiful; but what caused us to marvel most, on our way there, and during our train travel from Dover, was to behold so few cows in your fields, sometimes only one. In Holland there are always many, many cows in every field."

"It must be lonely for our cows," remarked Miss Kinnder, who had such a kind heart. "I never thought of that before."

"It is not for the feelings of the cows I care," said Cornelia, "it is for the waste of rich pasture."

"Talking of Battle Abbey," said the Vicar, deliberately sponging out the cows, "you must both of you come with me to Southover next week. I want to see the tomb of Gundrada, the fifth daughter of the Conqueror, who married William of Warenne, his most distinguished general. He lived, it is said, at Lewes Castle. We may see that, also, and something of the town as we pass through."

"Is it much distant, this tomb of which you speak?" asked Jules cautiously, not, apparently, exhilarated by the project.

"We shall go by train from Bexhill to Lewes, and a little exercise afterwards will do you good. It will be a most interesting expedition. The tomb of Gundrada and her husband, erected by public subscription, in 1847, is, I believe, magnificent." That Gundrada was kin to the redoubtable Norman explained Erasmus' enthusiasm, but could not excuse his neglect to re-fill Jules' ostentatiously empty plate.

"The Vicar is naturally keen to visit Southover Church," I said, when I had called attention to Jules' plight, "because it once contained an altar dedicated to St. Erasmus."

"I have heard of the great Erasmus," observed Cornelia, not expressing herself quite felicitously. "I remember that he excelled in mixing salads."

"It is regrettable," said the Vicar severely, "that famous persons should be only remembered by the frivolous" (she really deserved this), "because of some unimportant association of ideas. They would forget Socrates were it not for his scolding wife; Alfred, without his burnt cakes; King John, minus his lost luggage; and now the great Erasmus" (was a sarcastic stress upon the adjective purely my imagination?) "is remembered because of his skill in making salads." "And Queen Anne, because she sat in the sun," added Miss Kinnder, believing, I fancy, that she presented an authentic historical fact.

"She was wise," said Jules, actually putting down his fork for an instant; "it is better to sit in the sun than to behold tombs."

"Whether Queen Anne sat in the sun or not, I do not know," said the Vicar. "Anyway, she was a lethargic, ineffective woman, and, even in this respect, her example should not be copied to excess. You will come with us to Southover, Jules—your father wishes you to see Sussex." And, with this liberal interpretation of Monsieur Huard's final letter, he rose and went into the study to interview a nervous couple who had "come about" their banns.

Between them, Cornelia and Jules devised a daily programme which began, directly after breakfast, by carrying out deck-chairs into the garden. Here they located the hottest spot—unluckily, usually near the dining-room windows—and proceeded to read aloud, in turns, from the morning paper in preparation for their English lesson. Cornelia was an apt pupil; but Jules' efforts with the simplest headlines might have been those of an outsider struggling with the obscure "place-names" of Wales. After the lesson, Cornelia coaxed or goaded Jules into his tennis rig for a couple of sets before dinner, when the competition was always for the sunny, not the shady side. Neither of them troubled to keep the score; Jules only "remembered" points in his own favour, so constant wrangles at the net held up the game and averted the danger of the weary youth suffering from an undue expenditure of energy.

He declined to join Cornelia and Miss Kinnder on their afternoon walks, on the plea that Coombe Wood was too dark, and the roads generally too mountainous. Neither did bathing at Bexhill attract him—the sea water was too chilly.

After he had been dragged up the steep hill at Lewes, compelled to wander round the museum and

wonderful Sussex Room at Worthing, and taken for a whole day to Brighton—where only the Devil's Dyke intrigued him—he adopted the plan of mysteriously disappearing whenever the Vicar seemed at a loose end and an excursion might be threatened.

"Where does he go?" I asked Cornelia, his close though argumentative ally. "He goes to a field over there"—she pointed beyond the church—"takes off his jacket, and lies on his back in the sun" (which explained the increasing approximation of his face to the hue of pickled cabbage). "At first, the workmen, near by, say 'He is mad!' Then they say, 'He is French!' and only laugh."

But it remained for Cornelia to exhibit the greatest devotion to the sun-god, whose reign of splendour, during the summer of 1928, was so prolonged and truly regal.

The time had sped gaily by, and Cornelia's six weeks' visit had stretched itself out into seven when, one sumptuous July morning, Miss Kinnder hurried into my sanctum and begged me to come at once to the garden. She seemed disturbed. As I followed her I realised that Jules was violently playing his beloved jazz in the drawing-room—the loud, precise thumps on the piano were unmistakable, and an unusual performance so early in the day. I was still more surprised to find, when I reached the lawn, that quite a row of people had lined up on the drive which edged it. Two girls, with a basket of eggs, the tall butcher's boy, a small child, with a note from the schools, Mrs. Sirius, on her way to "clean" the church, and old Henry Banister, shamelessly sitting on the "wheelbr'er" were all staring open-eyed—and

the small child open-mouthed—at some exciting spectacle invisible to me.

Suddenly, a figure glided into sight. It was Cornelia, barefooted, clad in an ethereal white garment, tripping in and out among the shrubs and rhododendrons.

"What *are* you doing?" I cried, staring too.

Cornelia paused. "I am dancing in the sun!" She threw up her hands in ecstasy. "This is my sun-bathing dress. Do you like it?"

The more I looked at it the less I liked it. Something must be done at once, for it was Thursday morning, and the local reporters might appear at any moment on their weekly search for news. Here was thrilling "copy" indeed.

"Come this way," I said desperately, turning towards the greenhouse—"the grass is smoother here and the sun more powerful."

"But I shall not hear Jules play piano," she demurred.

"We can open the other window," I said, and Miss Kinnder expeditiously flung it wide. Cornelia hesitated, then glided forward out of sight of the gaping, frustrated audience, away from the emissary of the Press whose motor cycle was even then clanking at the gate.

I had hit upon the hottest spot; the fierce rays beat down; and soon the sun-worshipper sank breathless and exhausted upon the turf.

Two days afterwards, Cornelia, listening-in, retailed an ominous weather forecast. A depression was approaching from the Atlantic, rain would slowly spread to south-east England. The next morning, our foreign guests despatched brief postcards, and soon there were signs of packing up. In five days both

had left us. Cornelia dutifully returned to Holland, her apron still unsoiled, her racket showing grievous wear and tear. Jules vanished to an unknown destination; but Miss Kinnder, presently moving on herself, reported that she fancied she had seen him, in September, in a shelter on the Cornish coast.

Had he chosen England for his summer holidays because it was the centre of an Empire in which he knew the sun is always shining somewhere?

I am almost certain of it

CHAPTER VIII

A "TYPHOON" SHAKES THE VICARAGE

WHO of us—except the most unfortunate—has not experienced those golden moments which seem to pass as swiftly as one might erase a sum upon the blackboard, or fly the Channel, in a favourable breeze? These fleeting specks of time are halcyon, as a rule, because of some great delight they bring—to Tommy, aged eleven, the Christmas holidays, with their accompaniments of puddings, pies, and presents; to Tommy, at twenty-one, the evenings spent with the right "dancing partner"; and later on, that thrilling Hastings Cricket Week, when his first "century" is blazoned forth to an enthusiastic crowd.

Or bliss may be merely the result of sharp contrast, the calm that follows the tempest—the relief when the aching molar is extracted, the joy that the jaded politician feels when polling day is past, and—victor or vanquished—he can hold his tongue, at last, and shoot his grouse, play his salmon, or eat his shrimps at Brighton, with an easy mind.

But the happiness of the Vicar and myself, during the final days of April last, was the tempered serenity of the sailor who knows that a typhoon is on the way, and that the present lull is ominous and destined to

be brief. Our "typhoon" was a remote relation, Captain Wrayman, who was due at the Vicarage on May 1st, to superintend the removal of the bulky crates of china, curios, and pictures, which we had housed for him during his recent sojourn in South Africa. Captain Wrayman was a retired naval man, with an impressive array of decorations, one particularly deaf ear, a kind heart, and a violently argumentative disposition. Mere enumeration of the things of which he disapproved would almost have filled one of the mammoth catalogues at the British Museum. Nearly all our classic institutions came under his ban, including parsons, schoolmasters, Poet Laureates, and practically every Government Department. We had never forgotten the verbal wreckage of his previous visit, when he deposited the bulging packing-cases, and we looked at them, from time to time, with increasing apprehension, aware that the day must inevitably dawn when he would reappear to claim them, and the storm would burst again. It transpired that, fortunately, on this occasion, its full force would be abated by the tactful presence of Mrs. Wrayman. Placid, handsome, cherry, a permanent forty, Diana Wrayman unweariedly poured oil on troubled waters. If ideal wives could be supplied in the same way as "ideal houses," she would indisputably have been chosen to occupy the niche she now adorned through the slenderest chance. How, without her diplomatic intervention, brawls in the wardroom and mutiny on the lower deck had been averted in H.M.S. *Syntax*, and other ships where the contentious mariner had reigned supreme, would ever remain a mystery to me. That, so far as I could gather, all had gone smoothly, was one more splendid

testimonial to the discipline of the British Navy. Besides, I suppose, it is as unthinkable—and more dangerous—to contradict the captain of a battleship than to turn one's back on royalty.

When, on May Day, the taxi conveying our guests from Bexhill Station crawled silently up to the door, the first intimation of their arrival was the penetrating sound of Captain Wrayman's stentorian voice. It was really extraordinary, I reflected as I hurried out, that so lean, small and abstemious a man could make so large a noise.

I found him vehemently addressing the driver, whom he was holding firmly by the sleeve, while Mrs. Wrayman, smiling and unperturbed, emerged unaided from the cab.

"What is the matter?" I asked, after we had exchanged greetings. "Is the man overcharging?"

"No, no; Hector has already paid him—probably to excess, as he learned that his wife was ill in hospital. They are only talking about Napoleon, and do not quite agree."

I laughed—we were slowly collecting the travellers' usual impedimenta of suitcases and handbags—"Napoleon! How did he get into the conversation?"

"The man mentioned a mound, at Sidley, which, it is thought, was a gun-emplacement, prepared for defence against the French invasion. After that, we had a hectic journey, and were nearly in the ditch several times. Hector *will* sit beside the driver, and Napoleon is one of his red rags."

"An arch villain!" Captain Wrayman was roaring, "a world pest! You don't know what you are talking about, my man. If it had not been for the drubbing Nelson gave the French and Spanish fleets. . . ."

Mrs. Wrayman touched her husband gently on the arm.

It was high time a brake should be applied. At any moment the misguided admirer of Napoleon might make a desperate bolt and provide piquant food for gossip, at his first refuge in the village.

"My dear"—Mrs. Wrayman could accurately modulate her charming voice to reach, or evade, the Captain's least deaf ear—"Miranda is waiting to welcome you."

Instantly, he swung round, released the quivering driver, thrust upon him a final coin, and shook my hand with genial warmth. "Well, here we are! Your place is looking pretty. By the way, we have brought Hildebrand with us; I hope you don't mind?"

Hildebrand? It was the first time that I had ever heard of her. Could she be Mrs. Wrayman's niece, who lived near them, at Seaford, whither they had come? But why this German appellation? I thought that Miss MacDoone was Scotch. It was unlike Diana, too, not to have warned us of this addition to the party. Besides, where was she? I looked about in vain.

"She bit the maid this morning, rather badly," continued Captain Wrayman, casually. "The woman deserved it though, her porridge is atrocious. But she threatened to leave if Hildebrand remained with her, and Diana says she is better than nobody. I doubt it myself. Come here, Hildebrand, and be introduced." He whistled, and the sudden appearance of a self-important cocker spaniel, with a distrustful mien, explained a scuffling I had heard among the bushes. Immediately, the house kennel, scenting an invader from afar, rent the air with cries of fury.

"Better let them fight it out," thundered Hildebrand's owner, regarding his own stalwart champion without qualms. "Then they'll settle down and make friends."

"Mine are small terriers," I protested, and a horrid vision of the haughty interloper finishing them off, one after another, swept before my eyes. "Hildebrand weighs nineteen pounds; they must be kept apart," insisted Mrs. Wrayman sensibly.

We decided, between us, upon a Box and Cox arrangement for the canine family's outings and exercise, and that a time-table, to avoid regrettable incidents, should be drawn up after tea.

The Vicar's belated arrival for that meal gave me the impression that he had hoped to find it over, and was chagrined that his resourcefully planned tour of the Marl Pits Cottages had proved too expeditious after all.

"Hullo, Padre! What have you been up to this afternoon?"—Captain Wrayman fell with avidity on his prey—"attending a Conference, or organising something, I suppose. That is all you parsons seem to do nowadays. Why don't you stick to your proper job, converting the heathen"—he punctuated this challenge by a vigorous thump on the table—"there are plenty of them about."

"Quite so," agreed Erasmus dryly. His tone implied that, certainly, he, for instance, would not have to search far.

"Instead of roping in the sinners," Captain Wrayman thundered on, "you waste your time organising this and organising that. In fact, to-day, half the world is trying to organise the other half. He will be a plucky fellow, by jove, who tries to organise me!" He glared a fierce defiance round the table. The

haste with which Erasmus helped himself to jam indicated that he, for his part, entirely repudiated any desire to make such a mad attempt. But he wisely said nothing, recognising, no doubt, that the odds were too unequal.

The Captain had been fed, and he had not.

"All our great reformers were organisers," I said, rushing in recklessly, "those 'magnificent cranks,' as one historian calls them, 'who are the salt of the earth.'"

"Bravo!" applauded Diana smiling. "He anathematises—and subscribes to—everything." Her smile extended to the anti-organiser.

"How do you like Seaford?" inquired Erasmus, feeling cautiously for safe ground.

"A one-street, hopeless little backwater," denounced Captain Wrayman, still on the quick-sands. "You may well wonder how we landed there. Diana ran down and took the house one day when I had gone to Portsmouth, to see how they had furbished up the old *Victory*. So there we are, nine miles from the nearest approach to civilisation, by which I mean Eastbourne. I don't count Brighton, that over-grown town is positively barbaric."

"We both like Seaford very much," asserted Mrs. Wrayman, in her nice way. "We have some congenial neighbours, and Hector enjoys pottering about the garden, putting in the seeds; the mustard and cress, at any rate, are sure to come up."

"The parson at Seaford has a soft billet," said Captain Wrayman, very much annoyed. "There is only one church for a population of eight thousand, so, of course, it is packed out every Sunday. No trundling round there, compelling them to come in."

"It is amusing," chimed in Diana, "when visitors turn up late, expecting to find the usual half-empty church, and there isn't a vacant seat."

"Visitors!"—her husband's least deaf ear clutched at the word—"why they turn up, and what on earth they do with themselves baffles me! They can't laze about all day on the beach watching the fishermen bring in the lobsters. If it hadn't been for the golf links, I should have gone in, right off the deep end, before our first week was over. However, they are arranging a parking place now, for sixty cars, so we shall have to swallow our share of dust this summer. As it is Sussex dust—and, therefore, of superior quality—I suppose Diana thinks it won't matter." His laugh boomed out sarcastically.

"I infer that you are a keen South Saxon," I said to Mrs. Wrayman. "Good."

"South Saxon"—the Captain's hearing apparatus was functioning exceptionally well—"yes, that is what she calls herself now. 'Briton' is near enough for me. But she has caught Sussex-itis from that minx, Stella MacDoone, and her mother—and caught it severely. Our little shanty is plastered with tepid pictures of Sussex landscapes—a print of the Battle of Beachy Head might be worth hanging—that hideous, dingy Dicker-ware affronts me at every turn and corner; and the three of them are always out together, poking about historic houses or losing their way on the Downs. There are passable views in Sussex, but when you have seen the Victoria Falls, Constantinople by moonlight, and the bay of Naples—"

"See Naples and die; see Sussex and live!" I interrupted. "Here is a new slogan for you!" I exchanged a smile with Diana.

"South Saxon is a very old name for an inhabitant of Sussex," said Erasmus, who remarked to me afterwards that he considered the Captain's comparisons in execrable taste. "Bishop Asser, the friend and biographer of Alfred the Great, describes how, in 885, he paid a visit to the King, at the royal 'vill Dene,' in the 'country of the South Saxons.' . . ."

"Alfred! Another of your over-rated national heroes." Captain Wrayman swooped wrathfully down on this celebrity. "Too many irons in the fire, and I've always suspected, a bit of a prig. What business had he to be fussing over bishops when he had those Danes to tackle? Asser! The name fitted him, I've no doubt! In my opinion, all parsons, bishops and the lesser clergy . . ."

"My dear"—Mrs. Wrayman rose hastily—"you ought to take Hildebrand for a walk. She has been very patient in the bathroom during tea."

Her intervention had its usual instantaneous effect. Our "typhoon" sped into the hall, hunted distractedly for his hat, and shouted for Hildebrand, who, being unable to turn the handle of her prison, was, mercifully, unable to respond immediately. This gave me time to incarcerate the home kennel before Diana reached the exile.

"I want to have another look at your stocks," announced Captain Wrayman, with the kind of ringing intonation which Erasmus adopts for giving out the hymns in church. "I noticed them as we drove by, so we may as well go that way. Wideawake people, our predecessors. They knew how to keep the populace in order without resorting to any ridiculous organisations. How old are the stocks? Made of iron, I think." Their stability seemed to afford him satisfaction.

"They replaced the old wooden ones less than a hundred years ago, I believe"—the Vicar, thankful, I imagine, for any signs of grace in so unpromising a pilgrim, refrained from mentioning that it was Sussex iron. "The men of the village, disliking the use to which they were put, burnt the wooden stocks. But the authorities, not to be beaten, substituted the stronger ones you see."

"Pity they are not used now," regretted Captain Wrayman grimly. "The whole nation is getting too flabby. Anyone who holds up a girl clerk in a post office, or embezzles his neighbour's money—who becomes, in short, a criminal, is immediately petted and coddled. We had a different system, I can tell you, in the *Syntax*"—a statement I could easily believe. "Have a cigarette, Padre? If you like this brand, there's a boxful for you knocking about somewhere."

Diana had produced the hat, and, with a mighty slam of the front door, which, like the cheer raised by Dickens' baby-kissing candidate at Eatonswill, "would have done honour to an earthquake," the Captain and Hildebrand were gone.

The following morning was devoted by our visitors to strict business. The united energies of the household succeeded in safely transferring the bulky packing-cases from the attics to the big North Room; and, when I looked in about eleven, two had been already opened and their delicate contents ranged on every available piece of furniture.

"I must overhaul everything," boomed Captain Wrayman, who was gingerly wielding a duster, while Diana sat at the writing table and compiled an inventory. "All movers are alike; Moggs is certain to damage something and declare it was done before

he touched it, unless I know better. Diana says as a Sussex man he is sure to be above reproach. Well, he will find he is not above mine if he tries any hanky-panky tricks with me!"

We laughed in chorus at this jest, and the Captain's contribution alarmingly rattled the valuable ware which bounded us on every side. I marvelled that Mrs. Wrayman's nerves could stand the strain, and offered to send them up some lunch.

It was about ten minutes after the tray had been despatched that the Vicarage resounded to the ominous and frightful noise of crashing china. It emanated from the direction of the North Room, and swiftly upon its heels came the roar of a now familiar voice. What, I wondered, lay in ruins. Some of the Crown Derby dinner service, or the lovely hand-painted tea-cups, and which tragedy would afflict the Captain most? I admit that, for one cowardly moment, I hesitated to ascertain. Then, pulling myself together, I went to the scene of the disaster.

When I opened the door the pair were standing by the window, pale and obviously shaken, but quiet and composed, and on the Captain's lean and slightly besmudged face was actually a smile. There was really something rather splendid about our contentious guest, I reflected. He had shone in the great ordeal and was master of himself, "though china fell."

"It is nothing," he assured me cheerfully, "nothing at all—don't worry. We had a shock, but it was only your tray. I had placed it on the window-sill, and it must have had too much top hamper. Anyhow, over it went. I am afraid it's a complete casualty, but, thank goodness, everything is replaceable."

Diana murmured her regrets, and I endeavoured not to notice a fragment of a favourite old cake-dish protruding from the pile of debris.

"These little accidents will occur"—Captain Wrayman was still in high good humour. "Luckily we had finished the Ovaltine. It is curious, though, that it should have happened, for one of your water-bottles went west before breakfast when I was filling up Hildebrand's bowl. It comes of putting on too much steam. But that rascal, Moggs, will be here by noon to-morrow, and Diana insists that I am to take her to Pevensey Castle this afternoon—to see the new excavations, she *says;* to go one better than Stella MacDoone is what she really means." He bellowed with delight at this thrust, and resumed his duster. "We are both off to town directly Moggs has gone, as I am let in for a naval dinner at night." He began to hum a rollicking chanty.

"They have dug up some ancient stone cannon balls at Pevensey," I said, so exasperated that I did not care a bit when the gaily manipulated duster nearly bowled over a priceless teapot. "They ought to interest you; they must have been most destructive." I left them, satisfied that mine, after all, had been the final fling and that it had gone home.

Three days later I unpacked an attractive-looking wooden box which bore the label of a famous London shop. It contained a delicious little tea-set in the glowing flame colour which the donor knew I loved, and two cake-dishes of the same fascinating pattern were there also. And as I read the characteristically warm-hearted note which accompanied the gift I understood why Diana had married our "typhoon."

CHAPTER IX

THE LUCK OF EGBERT LAUREL

I WAS glad that I had reversed my usual "circular route" when distributing the Parish Magazines, in Lower Street, and had returned home, that soft June evening, along the perilous highway, instead of across the tranquil meadows.

For, when I reached the corner of the lane, I saw the trim, alert figure of our expected visitor, Egbert Laurel, Rector of Little Tollymore, standing by his dusty bicycle. He was gazing intently at the Recreation Ground—lost, no doubt, in wonder and admiration at this new acquisition, which every day became less like an arid patch of the Australian bush and more like a civilised playing field.

Hearing my step, he glanced round and rushed to meet me.

"This is perfectly delightful!" he cried, very hot and radiant. "I was marking time. I knew that I was early and you might both be out. And then, to meet you like this, just at the right moment!—it's topping! But my luck has been wonderful all day"—he was wheeling his bicycle now by my side, as we walked towards the Vicarage—"I have been running about, you know, looking at Sussex churches—Firle, Southover, Lewes—and it is extraordinary

how splendidly everything fitted in. At Lewes, when I went into the restaurant, lunch was just ready, and positively my favourite pudding on the menu card," he laughed with boyish glee. "Then, later on, when I popped into the station, there was actually a train for Bexhill waiting for me, and I had not even peeped at the time-tables."

"Much better not," I suggested lightly. "At least, that is what I find with buses. If I study the time-tables, there is never the one I want for ages. But if I just slip over to the starting place, one is generally coming in. Perhaps buses and trains don't *like* being looked up!—it is so distrustful—and they pay us out."

"That is the Alice-Through-the-Looking-Glass sort of remark that I enjoy," asserted Mr. Laurel. "You say quaint things sometimes, you know. Do they understand them here?" He waved his hand dubiously towards the Council houses, the only dwellings visible at the moment, and evidently symbolising for him, the village.

"Some people do—old Mr. Carr, for instance. He is the greatest reader in the parish, and absorbs books as—as a Thibetan does tea! It makes him attractively broad-minded and understanding. Like you, he is infectiously cheerful—under adverse circumstances, too, for he cannot move from his sofa."

"Poor chap! As to me, I can't help being cheerful" (I begged him not to apologise), "I am having such a gorgeous holiday—Little Tollymore is all right, of course"—a slight cloud momentarily dimmed his brightness—"still, it is a rest to get away for ten days, and people have been so marvellously kind. I have stayed already with four old friends like your-

selves, and each one of them has invited me to come again. Isn't it *nice* of them?" He was beaming again, as happy as the proverbial sandboy.

I laughed. "Your friends know which side their bread is buttered. Not every guest adds to the gaiety of households. I assured Erasmus this morning, that your society would be a more effective tonic than any mixture in bottles or capsules. He was so depressed, at breakfast, about the dearth of teachers in the Sunday-school and the superfluity of weeds in the drive." We had now entered that approach, where a thin regiment of dandelions grinned defiance of any manœuvres to uproot them.

"You must not say such charming things; I shall get swelled head if you do," protested Mr. Laurel, not at all displeased. "They would never occur to anyone in Little Tollymore. Hullo!—there is Erasmus —this is jolly!" His eyes travelled upwards to the study window, which framed the Vicar, writing at his desk. "I say, what is he doing, shut up there, on a glorious day like this?"

"I don't know. Possibly dealing with an impudent person—I am quoting his words—who wrote to-day to inquire if the title of his booklet, 'Where did William Land?' indicated a prize competition; or he may be merely inditing a birthday letter to Aunt Jane."

"Stuffy jobs, both of them. We must get him down. Hullo! *Hullo!*" His insistent, lively shouts soon aroused the Vicar, who, like Jezebel, on a famous occasion, looked out of the window. The parallel, mercifully, extended no further; for he promptly carried out his signalled intention of descending, tamely and intact, by the usual method of the staircase.

"It is barely half-past six—do let us sit in the garden till supper-time, and talk about Sussex."

This, to me, agreeable proposal emanated from our indefatigable visitor, who had chaffed the Vicar, greeted the maids, patted the dogs, admired the blaze of rhododendrons, sniffed the roses, and altogether made himself vastly popular, alike with biped and quadruped. He had finally detected the chairs, sheltering in the greenhouse, and was now marching towards the shady ground, beneath the monkey-tree, with one under each arm.

"I shall be sure to sneeze over there, near those horrid moon-daisies," remonstrated Erasmus, following most reluctantly. "Surely you remember, Egbert, what a martyr I used to be at Oxford, at this season. The Eights Week and my hay-fever always arrived together. I never cared a snap really which boats bumped—I was too miserable. As to talking about Sussex, I can do that anywhere."

"Quite a crowd of people here seem to feel like that, I notice," remarked Mr. Laurel, dryly, forging remorselessly ahead. "For example, an elderly lady, who pinned me in a scorching spot at Firle, this morning, to give me an elaborate survey of the village. I had merely asked to be directed to the church. She included a detailed account of the two historic Firle eggs." He carelessly introduced the eggs, and simultaneously planted the most capacious chair enticingly before the Vicar. The combined lure of comfort and curiosity proved irresistible.

"What eggs?" inquired Erasmus, occupying the chair. Mr. Laurel smiled triumphantly at me.

"I jotted the story down on this envelope. Ah, now we are all provided for," as Freda supplied a

third chair. "This is a photograph of Firle Church" —he had dived into the fat envelope—"a pretty setting and fascinating old building. About the eggs. A long time ago, some workmen, who were repairing the roof of an old house, near the church, were surprised to discover a secret hiding-place, very cramped and tiny, made of rushes, and among the rushes were two ordinary hens' eggs, evidently taken there to feed some refugee. It is suggested that he may have been the celebrated Duke of Ormond, who was attainted for high treason, in the reign of George I, and that the house was the property of his friend, Sackville Graves."

"What became of the eggs?" I wanted to know.

"The garrulous dame did not inform me—perhaps they exploded," suggested Mr. Laurel vaguely. "Very stale eggs *do* do that, sometimes, I believe. But Firle is such a sweet, fragrant spot, not the kind of place where such a—er—painful accident could happen. No, I prefer to picture them, scientifically preserved, in the safe custody of one of your admirable museums."

"I have never seen the eggs," declared Erasmus, throwing at once the dark mantle of suspicion over the whole affair.

Our resourceful guest, dropping the eggs, was again diving into the fat envelope.

"Are you interested in church bells? Here is a postcard of Southover Church, where there is a fine peal. I have recently had our bells at Little Tollymore re-hung, so I enjoy comparing notes. How many have you here?"

"Obviously, Egbert, our wooden tower could not support a number. We have only one." The Vicar

punished Mr. Laurel for extracting this confession of inferiority by showing signs of restlessness. It was plain that neither photographs nor bells would hold him much longer in the malevolent vicinity of his floral enemies.

"I am sure it is a very nice one." Mr. Laurel continued to confirm the perspicacity of his four preceding hosts.

"The story goes," I said laughing, "that, prior to the era of the wooden tower, our church was well equipped with bells, which were annexed by the neighbouring village of Hooe."

"An incredible and uncharitable invention," said the Vicar severely. "Why one of the Hooe bells is actually inscribed, 'Peace and good neighbourhood' —that alone, I think, is sufficient refutation of such a calumny. And another inscription runs, 'Music is medicine to the mind.' The whole lofty tone of the Hooe bells ought to lift them above such foolish gossip." He threw a reproving glance at me.

"How splendidly up you are in everything, Erasmus." Mr. Laurel was scribbling rapidly on another fat envelope.

"Not at all," modestly disclaimed the Vicar. "Mr. Day, of Hooe, recently copied the inscriptions for me." Still our cheerful visitor's unfailing diplomacy again compelled my admiration. "Mr. Day repudiates, as I do, the aspersion that Miranda has thoughtlessly circulated."

"The conceited little treble bell rather spoils the lofty atmosphere," I said, refusing to be suppressed, "by proclaiming, 'I mean to make it understood, that though I'm little, yet I'm good.' Even in a bell, self praise. . . ."

"I am becoming thoroughly chilled, sitting here." The Vicar rose with dignity and took out his watch. "I shall stroll towards the gate; Mr. Blaney will be here directly, and someone ought to have the civility to welcome him." With this parting shot, he escaped immediately across the lawn.

"Yes, another visitor, for weal or woe, arrives to-night." I answered Mr. Laurel's questioning glance.

"For 'weal or woe'—does that imply . . .?"

"That I have never seen him? Exactly. I will tell you all I *do* know. He is a chartered accountant, and lives alone in rooms in London. His father is a cleric somewhere in Yorkshire. Erasmus encountered the younger Blaney, last month, in a dentist's waiting-room, at Broadstairs, where he was reading the *Daily Mail Year Book*. I merely mention this by way of clue."

"Perhaps that is not so bad as it sounds," suggested Mr. Laurel hopefully. "He may have been merely skimming the advertisements. That is all I can ever sufficiently detach my mind to do in the ante-chamber to the scene of torment. Any further ingredients?"

"He told Erasmus that all he knew of Sussex was through a two hours' stay at Newhaven, after a stormy crossing, and that he considered the county greatly over-rated. The sequel was an invitation to spend a week-end here."

"The dish threatens to be heavy," deducted Mr. Laurel. "Still, it may turn out all right. I have had such luck all through this little holiday, it can't desert me now."

We decided to leave the Vicar to bear the brunt of Mr. Blaney's reception, and to fill the interval

before supper by a visit to the church. Here, immediate proof was forthcoming, illustrated by the long arm of coincidence, of the persistence of Mr. Laurel's lucky star. Two men were standing inside the main door staring, as well they might, at the anachronistic alabaster font. They turned as we walked down the aisle; and the unbelievable thing happened.

"We are ringers from All Saints', Hastings," said the older man. "We were wondering how many bells there were here?" Metaphorically, the Rector of Little Tollymore fell upon their necks; actually, he hunted frantically for his pencil, seized some disused notice papers and plied them with eager questions. They had, it transpired, the bells of Sussex at their finger ends. "One of the finest peals hereabouts is at Salehurst," said the chief spokesman, "the bells date back to 1771, and a full peal is rung every Sunday. The same with us. No use having good bells if you don't ring them."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "the people who complain in the papers of the noise of church bells do not like being reminded it is service time. They cannot pretend motor horns are more musical."

"Well, at Brighton, two churches—one, I think, St. Nicholas—have ten bells to do the reminding," said the ringer. "At Brightling, again, there are eight, each inscribed with the name of a victory over old Napoleon: Toulouse, Pyrenees, Talavera, and so on, down to two Waterloos."

"That was a victory worth rubbing in—a real victory," remarked Mr. Laurel, pausing in his rapid record of campanological lore. "As someone has said 'battles are not won nowadays, only one side is rather more vanquished than the other.' What about

Bexhill bells?" he harked back briskly to the main theme.

"There are good ones at St. Peter's, the old Parish Church." The ringer's stream of information rippled on; and I wandered away to inspect the altar vases and fetch a can of water from the Vicarage. When I returned the two men were hurriedly leaving, to catch a bus, and Mr. Laurel was complacently stuffing his copious notes into his pocket.

"Suppose," he said, drawing a long breath, "we had omitted this visit to the church and had missed those men!"

"Well, for one thing you would have had less material for conversation with Mr. Blaney to-night," I suggested smiling. "My intuition, coupled with discreet hints from Erasmus, tells me that it will be hard going. But your luck is really phenomenal."

It was not only phenomenal, I reflected, it was portentous. I remembered uneasily the story of King Polycrates and the ring; I told myself that, even one so worthy of good fortune as our genial guest, must be subject to the swing of life's see-saw. Like other poor mortals, he could not entirely escape reverses. There must be a fly in the amber somewhere.

And, in fulfilment of this prophecy, a "fly," at that very moment, was crawling up to the door, in the company of the Vicar, in the guise of Mr. Archibald Blaney. The four of us connected up in the hall.

"Here is my wife," said Erasmus, glad, I fancied, to behold me. I shook Mr. Blaney's tepid hand; "and this is Mr. Laurel, Rector of Little Tollymore, Bucks."

"Oh!" said Mr. Blaney, transferring his tepid hand to Mr. Laurel, who hastily murmured that it had been a lovely day.

"Oh!" said Mr. Blaney. "I hadn't noticed it particularly. One doesn't, in Town."

Tall and youngish, he was good-looking in a dull, unemotional way; he wore the correct garb for the country; and appeared, in the dreadful parlance of the mid-Victorians, eminently presentable and gentlemanly. Yet, as he stood there, as glum as he was spruce, an oppressive atmosphere seemed to fill the hall, and the smile faded from Mr. Laurel's face.

"You will like to see your room, Blaney." The Vicar, with a palpable effort, assumed the rôles of attentive host and pilot. He had hit, it soon became apparent, upon a most inappropriate expression. The new-comer was one of those incorrigible malcontents who never admit really "liking" anything. I did my best for Mr. Laurel, when presently we sat down to supper, by including in his vista an inspiring glimpse of the garden and the roses; whereas Mr. Blaney had to rely, for mental stimulus, on our episcopal portrait gallery, with Lord Davidson as its centre.

"I saw a letter from your father, in the *Steeple* last week," began the Vicar chattily, liberally ladling out the soup. "It was in reference to a recent 'Life' of Charles Dickens."

"Oh!" said Mr. Blaney, "sounds like the Guv'nor. Dickens is a hobby of his. I don't care about him myself—nor Shakespeare—never read them."

"It is daring of you to bracket them together," I observed. "Would the coupling have shocked—or gratified—the author of *David Copperfield*, I wonder?"

"After all, there is a certain kinship between them,"

pointed out Mr. Laurel, revived a little by the soup. "The same spirit of broad, robust humanity animates both writers. Take Falstaff, Prince Hal, Pickwick—they are all variations of the same jolly good fellow, whom we Britishers love."

"Pickwick!" Mr. Blaney caught at the word. "Oh, I remember now, he was editor of some paper. A chap at my club has a terrier named after him. I never had a dog myself." He added this with the air of conscious superiority which the reckless adopt when they boast of immunity from wasp-stings, mumps, and other usually unavoidable afflictions.

"How is your father?" Erasmus was evidently sorely pressed for topics. Had the malign influence of Mr. Blaney's presence obliterated the ostensible purport of his visit—to crowd his warped mind with true pictures of the beauty and lure of Sussex?

"Oh!" said Mr. Blaney—I had begun to listen for this monotonous and exasperating preface—"I haven't heard lately. The Guv'nor seldom writes to me; he prefers writing to the papers." I reflected that, although I had known Archibald barely half an hour, I could understand his father's choice of the two alternatives.

There was another depressing pause. Still, Erasmus stubbornly withheld any allusion to the delights of Sussex. Was he deterred by the proverb anent casting precious jewels before the unappreciative denizens of sties? It might be so; but duty must be done—I would shoulder the responsibility myself. I would not only talk about Sussex; I would tell them another story about Hooe.

"Talking of Hooe," I said (we *had* been talking about it, hadn't we, in that happy, prehistoric æon,

before the advent of Mr. Blaney?), "I met a lady the other day, who owned to knowing this neighbourhood more than fifty years ago. One Sunday, she told me, she went to Hooe Church, which lies across the marshes, in a water-logged corner of the county. Shown into a pew, she proceeded to fumble for a hassock. The sexton immediately signed to her urgently to desist. 'Is it forbidden to kneel down?' she inquired. 'You'll get rheumatiz in your knees if you do,' said the sexton gruffly."

"Oh!" Mr. Blaney stared at me. Then slowly illuminated, he added: "I see—he meant it was damp. . . ."

The heavy meal dragged on. At last, having ascertained that Mr. Blaney did not "care about" the wireless and "never smoked," we filed dolefully into the drawing-room, and, for two interminable hours, devoted ourselves to the herculean and quite futile task of "entertaining" him.

After breakfast the next morning, various errands to the village detained me there for some time. Re-entering the Vicarage, about eleven, I was astonished to hear a sound which had recently ceased to wake the echoes—Mr. Laurel's cheery laugh. I listened again. Erasmus was actually laughing too! And Irene, in the kitchen, was giggling, as she often did, at one of Freda's jokes.

Lightness and gaiety once more pervaded the house. What had engendered this transformation scene? I dashed into the study, and was greeted by the pleasant aroma of tobacco and the spectacle of two clerical heads bent over a map of Sussex. Erasmus looked up as I turned the door handle.

"Blaney asked me to apologise to you for rushing off."

"Rushing off?"

"Yes, he had a wire directly after you went out. There had been a burglary at his rooms, and a safe, with valuable papers, wrenched open. He packed up and was gone, like a streak of lightning."

The unbelievable thing had happened again. I glanced at Mr. Laurel and laughed.

"It is said," I remarked, "that nations and men get the governments and wives that they deserve. Perhaps parsons on holiday get the luck that they deserve."

"Hear, hear!" cried Erasmus, with his finger on the spot marked Bodiam Castle. "I think that this afternoon——"

We all bent over the map together.

CHAPTER X

MRS. SARSBROOK'S MEMORY

"YOU will find Mrs. Sarsbrook," said the Vicar, "a fascinating old lady. She has a marvellous memory, and everybody likes her."

"Do you mean because, or in spite of, her memory?" I inquired. "A royal memory for faces is one thing, a plebeian retentiveness for awkward dates and facts quite another."

"Mrs. Sarsbrook's recollections are always tactful and pleasant," the Vicar assured me, "and yet always accurate. Her reminiscences are informative, and, often, amusing. Her knowledge of Sussex, fifty years ago, and more, is amazing. You will be delighted with her."

Nevertheless, he still clung tenaciously to her letter, which, I noticed, he had already twice slowly perused; and the delay in passing it to me appeared deliberate. Did it indicate that my mind needed adequate preparation, in order that I might read it in the proper spirit? I fancied so.

"Mrs. Sarsbrook," he added, "has been hospitality itself on my occasional visits to London, and we shall be glad of this opportunity to return her kindness. Miss Paladin, her capable companion, will relieve you of all anxiety. Mrs. Sarsbrook must be, at least, seventy-six, though, of course, she does not look it."

I agreed that the budding octogenarian put up as good a fight as any of her contemporaries against the once relentless finger-prints of Time. Still, in this instance, the widow's far-reaching piercings into the past seemed likely to illuminate the veriest tyro in arithmetic.

"Octogenarians do not 'bud'—the word is ill chosen," remarked the Vicar, but he remarked it mildly, for I had just secured Mrs. Sarsbrook's letter, and was scanning the opening lines.

> ". . . Greatly looking forward to seeing you and renewing my acquaintance with Sussex. How well I remember visiting Brighton, in 1872, with my four younger sisters (after measles), and marvelling at the wonders of the newly-opened Aquarium. We were at Hastings, two years later (after chicken-pox), when little Emily so enjoyed riding the dear donkeys. My mother regretted that she had not taken rooms at St. Leonards—then becoming fashionable—and thought the Hastings fishermen surly."

This prologue appeared wholly innocuous. I turned to the lengthy postscript:

> "We are quiet people, of simple tastes. Miss Paladin never eats suet puddings, pastry, cakes, or butter. She is fond of jam. The doctor forbids me all stone fruit, and neither of us cares much for meat. We find glasses of warm milk, before retiring, beneficial, and will bring our own hot water bottles."

(No doubt the wise precaution, even in early September, of an experienced campaigner.)

The "simple tastes" threatened to complicate the commissariat, I reflected. Fortunately, boiled eggs and rice pudding—the tepid mainstays of too many English households—were not on the black list, and they probably ate something.

My interest in the rosy, substantial, and reminiscent widow was deepened during our walk together, on the evening of her arrival at the Vicarage, while the capable Miss Paladin unpacked. Our destination was naturally the post office, for to locate that building is usually the vital necessity of every visitor. Long centuries of acute domestication have blunted the average holiday-making Briton's capacity to snap entirely the home chains, and he unreasonably hastens to put himself, at once, in touch with the people and affairs from which he has so lately fled. But although our slow progress brought us at last, that warm autumn evening, within sight of the postman's Mecca, neither on that nor on any subsequent expedition—so far as I could gather—did Mrs. Sarsbrook ever approach near enough to drop a letter in the box or buy a picture postcard. As a pedestrian she was wholly unbitten by the modern craze for breaking high-speed records, and her leisurely movements classed the snail, in comparison, as a reckless sprinter.

"What a beautiful expanse of country!" she exclaimed, pausing outside the little gate, leading from the church to Upper Street, already glad to lean upon her stick. "Is that the sea over there?"

"Yes. Beachy Head is visible on a clear day. Do you know Eastbourne?" It was a ridiculous and superfluous query, humanely aimed to prolong her respite from exertion.

"My dear, I spent my honeymoon there, in 1878. My marriage astounded everybody. I was twenty-six, and considered an old maid, doomed to be for ever on the shelf. Then, one day, most providentially —the expression was my mother's, for Matilda, my next sister, was also hanging fire—I met Mr. Sarsbrook, at a croquet party. He was forty-four, an advanced age in those days, and, to tell the truth, had his whims and crotchets. Still, I willingly accepted his second proposal—it was thought unmaidenly to jump at a first offer."

"The Victorians wasted much valuable time," I suggested. "If the present-day girl does not click at once, Romeo flies off—sometimes literally—to another Juliet. What was Eastbourne like in the 'seventies?"

"It was as dull as ditchwater," said Mrs. Sarsbrook, regarding the distant headland with a not too friendly gaze. "Eastbourne was Edwin's choice, because of its extreme quietness, the absence of crowds and of the ordinary gaieties of an English watering-place. I wanted to go to Tunbridge Wells."

"Tunbridge Wells," I said, as kindly as I could, "is not in Sussex." I suppose there have always been odd people who have honeymooned in other counties—even in other countries. Every generation has its wild experimentalists, ready to hazard anything.

"I know," admitted Mrs. Sarsbrook, "it is in Kent, except a tiny corner. But the Downs are very near," she pleaded, "and must always have contributed largely to its popularity. So handy, too, for camping out. I always think the story of Henrietta Maria—Charles I's unhappy queen—so touching. She was

ordered to Tunbridge Wells, you know, to recover her health, and had to live in tents on the Downs, with her retinue of twelve, for lack of proper accommodation in the place itself."

We crawled on for another dozen yards or so, and then Mrs. Sarsbrook, rather breathless, halted again.

"What did you do with yourselves at Eastbourne?" I inquired, the lead being left to me.

"We spent many mornings exploring; Edwin was a keen antiquarian. I recollect inspecting several old farm houses, one with a curious vaulted roof and a mysterious subterranean passage, linking it with the church. But the Roman discoveries in the vicinity interested poor, dear Edwin most; and he used to talk to me at meals about Roman roads, aqueducts and urns. I fear I was sometimes very stupid and did not quite follow all his remarks." She smothered an apologetic sigh.

"Was the theatre built then?" I asked, sorry for Mrs. Sarsbrook, and vainly trying to visualise the bridegroom of to-day heroically testing his Betty's devotion by such drastic measures.

"The theatre was there. Unfortunately, Edwin did not approve of plays. In the evenings, after our 'high tea,' we either sat on the grass, on Beachy Head, and looked at the French coast and the Isle of Wight, through our glasses, or made boating excursions round the bay. While the boatman rowed, Edwin would read aloud from 'The Lays of Ancient Rome.' The man was always very attentive, and, one night, when Edwin was declaiming in his best style, nearly upset us close to a cave called 'Parson Darby's Hole.'"

We moved slowly on once more, and the rows of houses in Upper Street began to range themselves more distinctly.

"Have you a butcher here?" Mrs. Sarsbrook abruptly stopping again, grasped at this uncertainty as a pretext for delay.

"Rather!" I said, "a cheerful and obliging butcher. We possess everything a thriving, ambitious Sussex village ought to have. I daresay soon we shall have half a dozen butchers—possibly even a Mayor and Corporation."

"At Pett Level, where we stayed nearly thirty years ago, there was no butcher," stated Mrs. Sarsbrook, very pink and overheated. "Worse than that, there was only one jug in the house where we lodged. It brought up our hot water, and then the landlady would tap upon the door to ask if she might have it for the milk. I bought the good woman a set of jugs, in Rye, for three-and-ninepence—white, with blue bands. The smallest one, I remember, was slightly chipped, so the shopman took threepence off. We left Pett Level, though, after a week—no man worth his salt will consent to live entirely on cold bacon and stewed rhubarb. Edwin, at any rate, stubbornly resisted."

She paused, as the church clock boomed out six heavy strokes, and an expression of relief appeared upon her face. "I think we ought to be turning back now—it so soon grows damp and misty, at this season. If you would kindly just point out the post office, I can direct Miss Paladin." She willingly devoted quite four minutes to memorising its exact position before, by halting stages, we retraced our steps homewards.

Anxious as Mrs. Sarsbrook had professed herself to be to see the growth and development of Sussex, her limitations as a walker, and the insuperable problems presented by the steps and doors of motor buses reduced her opportunities for exploration almost to nil. Cars she rigorously banned as expensive, and also unnerving on roads over which the motorist's autocratic grip annually tightened. Even to cross them with the "hop, skip and jump" agility which the feat demanded was, she pointed out, beyond her powers. She preferred, she said, to weed the rose beds in the morning, and her struggles with groundsel and rabbit's parsley were always thorough. Indeed, I thought that Miss Paladin, who had to empty the trug and put away the tools at the end of twenty minutes, might have been more interested and sympathetic than her manner sometimes indicated. The latter was extremely vivacious; but, although as talkative as Mrs. Sarsbrook, she discreetly forbore to reminisce. Between them the lively pair ensured that we should seldom have a slack or silent moment; and we speedily realised that was it a selfish policy to isolate them at the Vicarage. We ought, I suggested to the Vicar, to share their graceful cascades of anecdote and conversation with our neighbours.

"We might ask the Pages to tea," he agreed readily. "They are thoughtful and sensible people, and, I should say, good listeners."

The only drawback, I remarked, was lest Mr. Page who was considerably older than his wife, might be tempted to remember back too far. It was a matter upon which, we had both noticed, Mrs. Sarsbrook was sensitive and encouraged no rivalry.

"If he shows symptoms of butting in," said Erasmus, "mention the League of Nations. He strongly disapproves of it because he contends that it interferes with prophecy."

Storing this hint, I invited the Pages—new-comers to St. Leonards—and found them prepared to make the bold venture of a bus ride.

Erasmus and I had, long ago, discovered that, although the distance from the Vicarage to Hastings was considered easily to admit of our frequent presence there at conferences and committee meetings, on the other hand, the journey from Hastings to the Vicarage was deemed so tedious and forbidding that only those imbued with the intrepid spirit of a Columbus, or a Captain Cook, ever undertook it.

"I hear you have not been long in Sussex," Mrs. Sarsbrook, rosy and gracious, in dignified black silk, began to clear the ground directly the enterprising Pages had arrived.

"Only six months," said Mrs. Page. "We decided, when my husband resigned his living in the north, to settle down in this neighbourhood, and Hastings combines so many attractions." (As Erasmus had observed, the Pages were evidently people of sound sense.) "I remembered . . ."

This spoiled everything and I had not expected it from Mrs. Page—before, too, poor Mrs. Sarsbrook had even had an innings or scarcely taken up her bat.

"Sugar?" I thrust the basin so insistently upon Mrs. Page that she had to pay attention, and the crisis passed.

"I have agreeable memories of Hastings," declared Mrs. Sarsbrook, "but not every visitor appreciated

it, in the old days. Charles Lamb, for instance, described his visit there as 'a dreary penance,' and said there was 'no sense of home in Hastings.' No doubt, he was not feeling well."

"Campbell, the poet," put in Miss Paladin, brightly, "endured that 'penance' for five years, and regarded Hastings very differently. In those delightful lines, which he wrote on the view from St. Leonards, he says how gladly he exchanged 'the green lanes' and the 'darling field flowers' for the 'wild headland and the seamew's clang.'"

"Not much of the 'sea-mew's clang' to be heard there nowadays," remarked Mr. Page, "though the headlands are as fine as ever. But I remember, as a boy . . ."

"Sandwiches, or cake?" interposed Erasmus, wisely holding the League of Nations in reserve.

"My sisters and I enjoyed clambering about the caves," continued Mrs. Sarsbrook, good-naturedly ignoring Mr. Page's threatened indiscretion. "One was called, I remember, Butler's Cave, after an old man, well known in the town, and a great favourite with the artists, who liked to paint him. He constructed a number of hutches, outside the cave, for his family of pigeons, fowls, and rabbits—probably the hutches have long since disappeared. Matilda—my younger sister—was fond, too, of the picturesque climb from the beach to the East Cliff, and I often accompanied her. There was a convenient seat, half way up, on which we used to rest. At the top, I remember, were the remains of some great encampment . . ."

"The heights
Where the Norman encamped him of old,"

quickly quoted Miss Paladin, backing up Mrs. Sarsbrook magnificently.

"With his bowmen and knights,
And his banners all burnished with gold."

"A contingent of his knights and bowmen, perhaps," corrected the Vicar. "The East Cliff may have been an outpost; but the main army . . ." he proceeded to describe, with lavish detail, the probable disposal of the invader's forces.

"I am afraid," said Mrs. Page, who sat on Erasmus, right, and received the full impact of his deluge of information, "that I have rather forgotten my history." (Personally, I felt no animus towards her on this score.) "My husband," she added, "likes to prowl about among rocks and ruins—he even reads 'Sussex Notes and Queries' "—her tone seemed to insinuate that this was the last dry and desperate resource of an avid antiquarian. "I admit I prefer looking at the shops and laughing at the concert parties on the pier."

Mrs. Sarsbrook, I thought, glanced at her with sympathy. Was her memory busy with that drab honeymoon at Eastbourne, with the tantalising portals of the theatre closed to her by her prosy, domineering Edwin? Did she envy Mrs. Page her gay opportunities in an epoch of undisputed feminine emancipation? Perhaps.

"I saw in to-day's paper that the Brighton Aquarium is to be re-opened in the spring," said Miss Paladin, eagerly availing herself of Mrs. Sarsbrook's momentary silence and abstraction. "It will be a great addition to the interests of the town."

"The last time I visited Brighton was in the 'eighties." Mrs. Sarsbrook roused herself, and again briskly entered the lists. "Among other incidents, I remember our going to see the King's Head, in West Street—the inn, you know, where Charles II spent the night before his escape from England, after the battle of Worcester. Dr. Johnson, my husband reminded me, describes how he visited the inn, with Mrs. Thrale and Fanny Burney, who beheld it with 'loyal gratification.' Considering how the young man turned out," observed the widow candidly, "I think their emotion was exaggerated."

"Emotion, in those days, had a knack of running to seed in the wrong directions," I suggested lightly. "Now we pretend to be as cool and fibreless as an automaton, or those stony people in Arnold Bennett's books."

"That last visit of ours to Brighton," recalled Mrs. Sarsbrook, "was completely spoiled by Mr. Gladstone."

"I beg your pardon?" Erasmus abruptly detached himself from a colloquy with Mr. Page.

"My husband disliked him intensely," explained Mrs. Sarsbrook, "and when he heard the newsboys, one evening, shouting outside our hotel, 'Fall of Khartoum,' he was furious. He made quite a scene, in the smoking-room, after dinner, calling him 'a grand old muddler,' and saying that he was responsible for Gordon's death."

"There were many in the country who held a similar opinion," commented the Vicar.

"After that," said Mrs. Sarsbrook, apparently not much consoled, "you may imagine how nervous I felt when, the following Sunday, at St. Paul's, Mr.

and Mrs. Gladstone entered the pew in front of us. Mrs. Gladstone, I remember, had a startling wreath of red geraniums round her hat. My husband fidgeted so much with the hymn-books"—(which as missiles, I reflected, would have been effective)—"that I was thankful when the verger moved them further up the aisle."

We talked a little more; and then the Pages were borne off to see the "ancient church," the unescapable concomitant of a Vicarage tea-party. The afternoon, Mrs. Sarsbrook pronounced "most enjoyable," and now only two days intervened before the return of our visitors to London. But tiresome accidents can mar even the shortest interval.

The next day, when Miss Paladin and I were attending Mrs. Sarsbrook on her daily gallant struggle to attain the post office, we met Miss Holloway entering the little Western gate. My heart sank—for Miss Holloway, of all my acquaintances, was the one whom, at that moment, I least desired to see. She was as venerable as Mrs. Sarsbrook, and her memory as unimpaired.

"I was coming to call," she announced cheerfully, extremely interested in Mrs. Sarsbrook, who, of course, I was obliged to introduce.

"I remember," said Miss Holloway, as I knew she would, "I remember staying in this village sixty years ago."

"*Sixty* years?" faltered Mrs. Sarsbrook.

"Yes, I am seventy-nine," confessed Miss Holloway.

"And I am seventy-seven," admitted Mrs. Sarsbrook.

Miss Paladin and I glanced at each other. Things had, indeed, come to a pretty pass, when two well-

preserved women will stand up in public, as it were, and tell each other truthfully how old they are.

"I came here, sixty years ago," reiterated Miss Holloway, "with a friend, whose banns were being called in this church; and there was so little for her to do that she used to sit on that flat tombstone over there"—she pointed with her stick—"and recite poetry—chiefly Wordsworth and Milton—for hours together."

Miss Holloway had launched her attack, the fire of reminiscence had begun. Presently, amid the gathering shadows in the drawing-room, I listened, awestruck, to the incessant fusillade. Exhausting Sussex, Mrs. Sarsbrook dug up her thrills in Egypt; Miss Holloway retaliated with a tour in Spain; and so the battle raged. When all was over I hardly knew which was the victor, but Miss Holloway was certainly the fresher of the two.

Standing, panting a little, at the window, Mrs. Sarsbrook watched her late adversary's slowly retreating figure.

"There goes," she said dramatically, "a frightful warning—for any who may need it—of the sad garrulity of extreme old age."

CHAPTER XI

MOTORING WITH MAJOR CLINTON

WE do not possess a car at the Vicarage. I am not disclosing this astonishing fact with any anticipation of a Rolls-Royce, or even a humble two-seater, suddenly materialising one day before the porch. I lack the audacity of an old clergyman, with a steep parish in the Chiltern Hills, who once, long ago, boldly hinted, in a local paper, that a carriage—with pony attached—would lighten his labours. I remember hearing that he was very much surprised when a pony—with carriage attached—soon afterwards trotted up to his door. Fairy godmothers, working on this extensive scale, I fancy, are extinct—except, perhaps, in America, where it must be a perpetual problem how to dispose of superfluous luxuries. Nor do I make known our car-less condition as a phenomenon singling us out for unique distinction. It is, no doubt, an achievement to be original in this novelty-exhausted era. Still, I do not wish to seem vainglorious, or to boast about it. My idea is merely to account for any signs of prejudice which may have disfigured my previous allusions to motor cars. The sarcasm was really the result of envy, the evidence of sour grapes—of which the vines are planted, as, clinging desperately to the hedge, and

any semblance of a footpath, I watch the lordly motorists dash past.

So insubstantial is my antipathy to the popular mode of transit—or, at any rate, so evanescent—that I never refuse any good offer to join the dashers-past. Mindful of this inconsistency, the Vicar's first addition to the bare news of Major Clinton's projected visit was the information that he would bring his car, and probably take us for some expeditions. "It will be jolly," he said. He had his back towards me, as he replaced half a dozen volumes, returned by careful Mr. Carr, in a study bookcase, and it struck me that his tone belied the enthusiasm of his words. I put some questions about the car.

"It is pre-war, and not much to look at," he admitted; "a legacy from an aunt, I believe. But it runs well—exceedingly well. There is nothing the matter with the car." I dismissed as ridiculous a faint impression of bitterness in this tribute, and deducted little at the moment from a distinct stress upon the concluding noun.

Erasmus ought to be an authority, for during a recent sojourn with the Clintons, at their chicken-farm, in Kent, he had accompanied them on two motoring excursions. A slight accident, I recalled, had marred their trip to Stone-in-Oxney, and had involved the car in a few scratches and Major Clinton in recriminations with the driver of a baker's motor van.

"Clinton was a little absent-minded at the moment," explained Erasmus, when I had resuscitated this thought-provoking incident, "and did not at once notice that the man had signalled the necessity of his turning round. We were approaching the church

from Appledore—Clinton wanted to show me the curious Roman altar there—and he was much annoyed to find we had to pass a toll-gate. He strongly objected he said, on principle, to such an antiquated system of extortion. I tried to calm him by pointing out that, even in an up-to-date county like Sussex, there were still some toll-gates—one near Lancing, for instance. But it was no use. He takes things, I'm afraid, too seriously."

"It is the fault of those aggravating hens," I suggested, laughing. "Their behaviour is enough to make any man morose. How selfish they are!—insisting upon sitting up as late as they please, regardless of their owner's plans for the evening. As to food, they are regular 'Oliver Twists,' always asking for more; and they never lay eggs when eggs are really worth laying."

"There is hope for the chicken race or, rather, for the chicken-farmer," observed the Vicar. "Mrs. Pliny showed me some hens yesterday which she called Sussex fowls—clean, intelligent-looking birds. They are, I imagine, a new and promising variety."

"Sussex again," I said, "leading the chariot of progress in the feathered world, as elsewhere. But I shall do my best to make Major Clinton's visit pleasant. He may not have any Sussex fowls."

"You might arrange a tennis party for his second day; he plays, I know," suggested the Vicar thoughtfully, "in case anything—er—happens to the car."

As I went downstairs with another pile of volumes for book-voracious Mr. Carr, I could not rid my mind of the uncomfortable conviction that he almost hoped that something would. Any expectations on this score were, however, not encouraged by Major Clinton's

reports, on his arrival, of the prowess of his pre-war acquisition.

It had covered the distance, he declared, in record time.

"We did the journey from Folkestone to Ashford," he added proudly, "in——" I have decided, upon consideration, not to write down the figures. Persons who have never motored with Major Clinton might not believe them; and he has enough trouble with the chickens as it is.

The car, as the Vicar had hinted, was not externally impressive. It had an unassuming, modest aspect, and a coat of thick dust made conjecture as to its actual colour pure guesswork.

"I shall have to do a little tinkering presently," said the Major, fishing out his suitcase and racket. "One of the horns won't work, and the speedometer seems out of gear. It has been steadily registering forty-five, whereas I never let her out for more than thirty-five. Thirty is my average. We passed everything on the road to-day, though." It is in emotional crises like this that the drawbacks of an engine-driven age intensify. One cannot gratefully pat a motor-car, or cram apples or sugar down the oil tank without people thinking it odd.

"What is the matter with your hand?" The Vicar, always observant, had spied a bandage. Sometimes I think he is *too* observant. Persons who have cut their fingers, or acquired smuts on their faces, are so seldom grateful for public sympathy.

"I tore it on some barbed wire," said Major Clinton. "scraping a nasty corner, near Northiam. It is of no consequence. I went into the Six Bells—an inn in the village—and had it dressed."

After tea, commandeering chisels and other tools, he applied himself assiduously to the duty of repair. The task was so prolonged that Erasmus and I both went out, at intervals, to talk to him.

"Did you explore Northiam?" I inquired, on the second occasion, remembering the inn and the nasty corner. "Among other interesting things it possesses the largest wooden house in England. Its present tenant was telling me about it only yesterday. The house was built, a hundred and fifty years ago, by a rich banker, who had the privilege of making his own coinage—or rather tallies."

Major Clinton relaxed, for an instant, his worried concentration on the dissected contents of the speedometer.

"Gee-whiz! as our Yankee friends say—a man could snap his fingers at any number of hens with a Tom Tiddler's ground of that kind."

I laughed. "In the end, he lost £100,000, and was altogether, not a very happy person. There were some disreputable junketings, I gather, in that big timber house, in those gay old days."

Comforted, I think, by this sequel, Major Clinton returned to his one absorbing passion—coops and incubators being temporarily deposed.

"Where would you like to go to-morrow?" he inquired, delicately manipulating the disrupted speedometer. The Major is a polite, good-natured man; but I dislike taking advantage of a guest's estimable qualities.

"Had *you* thought of any direction?" I said carelessly.

"What about Eastbourne?"

It was the inevitable objective. A miserably befogged stranger once asked me if Hastings was in

Sussex! No one would ever launch a query like that about Eastbourne. All the world knows that minus this popular resort Sussex would be like a hero-less *Hamlet*. Every motorist is aware of its correct geographical position, and hankers to sample its parking-places. I smiled, glad that Erasmus was safely back in his sanctum. He is apt to be alarmingly frank, and would certainly have stated that we had been to Eastbourne—well, more than once or twice already.

"There are alternative routes, I see . . ." He was primed, as I had surmised he would be, with fully matured plans.

"Yes. We could go by the way of the Marshes and Pevensey," I agreed; deciding that, if wisdom dictated that course, I would persuade—or compel—him to travel home also by that comparatively safe and deserted artery.

"Both horns are top-hole now," he said briskly, "and if the speedometer doesn't act properly it won't really matter."

This ominous attitude of my chauffeur to-be stiffened my recent unspoken resolution. Better be upset in a dike—if upset we needs must be—than try conclusions with the long string of formidable vehicles on the Hailsham high road. I do not in the least sympathise with the feverish sentiments of our Chinese student, who told me quite seriously that he would rather be killed in an exciting manner than continue to live monotonously.

The sky was overcast when, at two o'clock on the following afternoon, we squeezed ourselves into the unassuming little car.

"If it rains, I'm afraid you will get wet," the Major

warned Erasmus, who was seated uneasily upon the dickey; "the cover will not help you. I hope it keeps fine, though, for if the windscreen is smeared I don't see too well."

Our perils thus augmented, the Vicar glanced significantly at me; and his anxious gaze around the drive seemed to be searching for some pretext —an urgent parishioner or postman—to cancel, at the eleventh hour, the hazardous enterprise. Major Clinton settled the matter by jumping in and starting the engine.

I had taken the precaution to immure the dogs; for, though as a mere man he would not wilfully hurt a fly, as a speed-mad motorist he could not be relied upon to exclude any obstruction as unsquashable. We made a neat—and close—affair of the exit through the gate; and he frowned his way impatiently down the children-scattered lane.

"Now we shall be able to proceed," he said alertly, as we emerged upon the highway. "Your main roads are quite excellent."

"Rather different from their condition in the eighteenth century," I submitted, "when eight horses were required to drag a coach from Goodwood to London."

"Curiously enough, the going was better in the Middle Ages than later on . . ." the Vicar was not to be blocked out of the conversation by his isolation on the dickey. "Old records prove that Sussex was intersected with passable roads when farm produce, cattle and messages were constantly conveyed to the Bishops of Chichester from their outlying manors and villages."

We were now moving at a good pace on a level track, and the Major was quite ready to talk.

"Apropos of old roads," he said, "I met our mutual friend, Dr. Henkle, in the train last week. He was discussing Dunning's book—which I noticed in your study—about the supposed Roman road from Portslade to London. Hullo—why didn't that wretched youth ring his bell?" A cyclist had suddenly come into view, and was staring at us as we flew past with an expression I could not honestly describe as one of admiration. "Boys on push-bikes ought to be forbidden by Act of Parliament. They take up half the room there is . . ." which showed how speed mania can completely demoralise a man of formerly unblemished veracity. He glared back defiantly at the dismounted space-monopolist.

"I thought I heard a tinkle," I said, in pursuit of that elusive commodity—justice. "Don't you think we are going too fast? I-I like to look at the scenery."

"That boy was Timothy Habcorn," the Vicar bent forward and informed us gloomily; "he will not be in the choir, of course, on Sunday, after running him down in this fashion."

"He is all right; naught never comes to harm," asserted the Major airily. I almost wished—if the inference was sound—that I could believe all the occupants of the modest little car came into this reassuring category.

"About Henkle," he continued—we had already left Timothy far back upon the Marshes—"he has a logical mind, and he maintains that if King John actually made that extraordinarily swift journey attributed to him from Portslade to Westminster,

for his coronation, he must have availed himself of a good track of some kind. And if it wasn't a Roman road, still in moderate repair, what road was it? That is what Henkle wants to know."

"Some Sussex antiquarians," I said, deputising as best I could for the lugubrious South Saxon on the dickey, "object to the Roman road theory because no certain traces of it can now be found. They suggest some other pre-Conquest—or even prehistoric . . ."

"There is a charabanc behind," shouted Erasmus. "I think the driver wants to pass."

The Major smiled. "He can do that when we stop at Pevensey, not before. No lumbering charabancs shall overtake me here. That is the Castle ahead, I think. We may as well have a look at the new excavations." He promptly accelerated the pace, and the charabanc remained sulkily in our rear.

The sun was shining when we pulled up before the Old Mint House, and one menace of our journey seemed to be averted. To balance this, the speedometer stubbornly refused to function at all, and callously left our fate in the Major's uncurbed hands.

We joined a trail of visitors straggling into the Castle grounds, and were greeted, at the entrance, by the guide.

"You must be careful," he warned us, "there are some treacherous pitfalls about, owing to the digging. A lady narrowly escaped a serious accident this morning."

It appeared altogether to be an afternoon fraught with excitements. Were we only to survive the Major's remorseless hustle to be swallowed up by

the Castle's gaping chasms? I resolved to tread cautiously.

"Some interesting discoveries have been made"—the guide resumed his official accents—"those ancient stone cannon-balls, over yonder, and this dungeon—oubliette, they called it." He lifted the cover of a deep, forbidding aperture—"where they threw down the prisoners and conveniently 'forgot' them."

"The Castle must have occupied a splendid strategic site," remarked Major Clinton, when we had climbed up one of the ruined towers to survey the grand sweep of open country. "The sea bounded it on one side, I imagine, in its early days."

"It was exposed to all the winds that blew," the Vicar reminded us. "A terrific storm, in 1734, irretrievably demolished the stately old keep. Records of that date describe how the neighbours surged in and carried off the fallen stones as 'wreck'—and relics—until the owner, Lord Wilmington, interfered."

"I think we ought to be getting along now," said Major Clinton restlessly, and I turned reluctantly away from the still striking scene, where so many generations of men had lived, and loved, and fought; and where so much mingled valour and cruelty had been displayed.

Fitting ourselves again into the meekly waiting little car we "got along" with such amazing velocity that we were, incredibly soon, providing a new thrill for the blasé inhabitants of Eastbourne. Possibly, they had never beheld an archaic motor move so rapidly; certainly they had never seen anyone so unsuited for a dickey as was Erasmus perched upon it. At any rate, they noticed us—to Major Clinton's evident gratification—even when under the Vicar's

eager supervision he slowed down to seek a tea shop near the sea-front.

Fortified by Eastbourne ozone—and buttered toast—Erasmus recklessly encouraged the Major's desire to return by the more adventurous route. Loath to damp our guest's enjoyment of a chicken-free holiday (I had ascertained that he possessed no soothing Sussex fowls) I offered no opposition. But when I stepped presently into the car I could appreciate something of the mixed emotions with which the competitors for the Schneider Trophy must set off on their hair-raising exploits. Our departure from the town was delayed by the slight error of taking the wrong road. The usually observant Vicar had missed a vital sign-post, while genially waving to an acquaintance on the path.

"You should have signalled that you wanted to stop," curtly admonished the policeman whom Major Clinton abruptly stopped to interrogate. "Yes, you will have to turn round. Better do it down that side street." The expert had promptly sized us up.

"The manners of the police force are not what they were," regretted Major Clinton, obviously rattled both by the constable and the side street; "they're off-hand and brusque nowadays. But with a Socialist Government, what else can one expect?"

We utilised the side street, and then whirled along, for a little time, in silence.

"You might point out any places of note as we pass," suggested our driver as we cleared Hailsham.

But the attempt proved mere waste of breath. At the moment when castle, church or sylvan glade came within our purview, he was invariably skirting

a tricky bend, passing a lorry or bus, or dividing the macadam with an advancing car. Distraction, indeed, was dangerous—a characteristic which I had never dreamed could attach itself to the lure of Sussex scenery or landmarks.

"My wife is learning to drive," said the Major casually, when we had hurried through leafy Herstmonceux, and were mounting a hill; "she seems to think it will be an advantage." His tone indicated a wonder I could not share. "It is really quite simple, of course," he added, "changing gear, for example, like this." His practical illustration was accompanied by a loud click, and immediately the modest, unassuming little car, infuriated by long months of hard toil and ill-usage, plunged forward into the ditch and refused to be extricated. In vain, the Major tried to back; in vain the three of us alighted, tugged and pushed. Most reasonably, the weary little car clung to its one chance of rest—or at least of respite. Chauffeurs of passing vehicles derided or grinned at us, until the Vicar, who had not withheld his frank opinion as to the cause of this undignified disaster, hailed a private char-a-banc, and successfully enlisted the services of four muscular and civil passengers. Soon, the modest little car's grubby nose was once again obligingly forging homewards, more humble in mien than ever. . . .

"All's well that ends well," quoted Major Clinton, with inexhaustible philosophy, as we neared the Vicarage. "How about a longer spin to-morrow, with tea at Rye?"

Left to meet this emergency single-handed—Erasmus had forsaken us in Upper Street on the forlorn errand

of pacifying Mrs. Habcorn—I boldly produced my trump card.

"Rye is always delightful," I agreed truthfully, "but to-morrow some friends are coming to tennis."

The Vicar's candour may sometimes be embarrassing, but his forethought is often invaluable, and occasionally amounts almost to inspiration.

CHAPTER XII

THE FAILURE OF CLAUD WU

EVERY year Christmas is ushered in by scenes of touching pathos at the London termini. There, hordes of radiant and devoted mothers eagerly assemble to await the youth-laden, incoming trains, of which some of the most crowded have reluctantly puffed their way up from Sunny Sussex to the foggy metropolis. Cynical, calculating porters and taxi-drivers, watching the rapturous welcome of innumerable Peters and Pamelas, grin meaningly at one another. They have Stanleys and Dorises of their own, at home, and remember, no doubt, what the "Missus" said that morning about the approaching holidays.

Kisses and "Darlings!" re-echo in the sooty air; the comedy has begun which has always the same "curtain."

Holidays, most parents know nowadays, were really invented, not for their benefit, but in order to preserve the sanity of that heroic band of long-suffering men and women—masters and mistresses—who nobly struggle to impart useful knowledge to a rising generation of sport-obsessed low-brows. The word holidays has acquired an ominous ring, alike in Hoxton and Belgravia—only, in the latter place,

the reaction is the more severe because the prologue has been the most intense.

At the end of ten days, Peter and Pamela have exhausted every home thrill, and their elders all their patience. The head of the house, rescanning the school bills,—which incensed him a week earlier, after a "lap" of acute friction with Peter, marvels at their moderation. He promptly despatches a cheque, animated partly, perhaps, by the desperate hope that its receipt may hasten the re-opening of the portals of Tabhurst College, to receive that frightful menace to Society—a boy of fourteen, satiated with play, and bereft of occupation.

The same problem seems to present itself with the youth of every nationality; and it occurred to the English guardian of Claud Wu, last Christmas, that the Vicarage was a spot where suitable distraction might be found.

Claud—a name substituted for an unpronounceable collection of Chinese characters—had been educated, for three years, in England; but, although a clever boy, his success in a recent examination was considered more than doubtful. It was, therefore, arranged that he should spend the last weeks preceding term rubbing up his worst subjects and reading classic literature, under the guidance of the Vicar.

"Wu has, unfortunately, little taste for serious reading," wrote Mr. Clarke; "he prefers to divert himself with Edgar Wallace, a cheap gramophone, and Charlie Chaplin films"—(which threw an eerie light on the dire result of tingeing the Oriental mind with Western "culture"). "I shall, thus, be grateful if you will endeavour to direct his attention to interests of a higher nature. I gather from my sister-

in-law, who has a bungalow in Sussex, that your neighbourhood is replete with noteworthy buildings and places. Inspection of these, primed with details of their history, should make Wu understand better wherein the true greatness of this country lies. I suggest that, at your convenience, he should see as much of your famous county as time and wintry conditions will permit."

Although worthy Mr. Clarke expressed himself in rather stilted language, it was plain he was a man of deep insight and quick intelligence. That he should have to quote a vague in-law, in a bungalow, as his authority on Sussex, was regrettable. Explanation, I fancied, lay in his long residence in China, whose scorching sun had burnt out what one might have imagined to be ineffaceable memories of the homeland. Mr. Clarke added that his ward was fond of games.

After a postponement which gave me the impression that the Vicarage was not the haven Claud Wu would have personally selected, he, at length, arrived, one frosty January afternoon.

Tall, hefty, with well covered bones, he looked an unusual specimen of his race. Only his eyes gave the unmistakable clue which induced observant and rude hobbledehoys, in the village, to call out "Chink," as he passed by. Little did they realise that the impassive newcomer was a boxer of more than ordinary skill, and that he had carefully registered every feature of the offenders' faces.

"Yes, I play many games—in fact, all," he said, at tea, when my recollection of Mr. Clarke's hint had relieved the tension of that inaugural meal—"and, at some, I am jolly good." False modesty,

evidently, was no part of his make-up. "At tennis, last summer, I beat, beat, beat many of our chaps. Some day, perhaps, I shall even beat Betty Nuthall's brother"—an achievement which his glistening eyes indicated would place him on a par with Hercules, Tilden, and all the mighty ones. "Now, it is cold," he continued, "and to-morrow there will certainly be skating. You have another boy here?"

There was no other representative of that enlivening genus present, and he glanced suspiciously at us. Had Mr. Clarke deceived him? Was he to be cut off from his kind, doomed to the undiluted companionship of an uncongenial pastor and his wife—people likely to be callously indifferent to the best gramophone crescendos of the Trix Sisters, and with inevitably rigid notions of keeping Sunday? He had, long ago, discarded his old heathen gods, adopted no substitute, and now had no one to please except himself. But he had learned the English alphabet at a Christian school at home, and knew what uncomfortable ordinances would confront him. I could read his melancholy thoughts, assisted by disclosures from worthy Mr. Clarke, and I hastened to throw a ray of light.

"Juan—a Spanish boy—is staying here," I said. "He went into Bexhill after dinner, shopping, and, as he said he would 'probably' be back for tea, of course I did not expect him. 'Probably' with Juan generally means improbably."

"Spain is hot—only probably he skates." A slow smile dawned on Wu's gloomy face. Had this exceptional Chinese actually a sense of humour? Was there to be one link, at least, between myself and this astonishing amalgamation of two continents?

"If he does not know, I can teach him," stated Wu, "I am jolly good at teaching things like that. And the ice will certainly bear to-morrow."

"Whether it does or not is of little consequence," said the Vicar stiffly. "To-morrow I am taking you and Juan to Battle Abbey"—he heartlessly dispersed the flicker of cheerfulness evoked by tidings of the still-delaying Juan. "Mr. Clarke has sent you here to read Macaulay, improve your mathematics, and see Sussex—not to skate. After Battle, we shall visit the ancient castles at Bodiam, Pevensey, Herstmonceux, Hastings, and perhaps extend our jaunts to Camber."

"Um," muttered Wu, introducing us to an exact equivalent for Juan's "probably."

"There are several Sussex handbooks in my study," added Erasmus, refusing to translate the "Um," "which will give you full information about these celebrated and romantic buildings."

"Um." I thought I had never heard any expression more devoid of real enthusiasm than this reiterated syllable.

There was a pause, while Wu mentally debated a subject obviously of great moment.

"About my pocket-money, sir," he said civilly, "how much am I to have, and can I have it now? At your Christmas feast I had presents of money —from my father, whose favourite son I am, and from Mr. Clarke. Now, all is spent. I can live very well without seeing your ancient castles—and all here is very young compared to China—but without money it is impossible to exist, or be amused."

"It is your knowledge rather than your purse which needs enlarging," said the Vicar dryly. "You

will not remain your father's favourite son—which, by the way, is a boastful way of speaking—if you fail in your exams."

"It is not certain that I fail this time," demurred the Chinese youth, whose good opinion of himself was not easily dislodged.

"It is practically certain, I gather from your guardian, but the results will soon be out. As to the antiquity of China—I do not dispute that point—but the age of Pevensey Castle, for instance, is unknown, it goes so far back into English history." This was a masterly retort; but, then, Erasmus is always at his best when championing any ground which William the Norman assuredly had trodden.

Drawn to the study by the promise of replenished funds, Wu soon emerged, jingling coins and carrying a handbook. The Vicar had guilefully combined the administration of medicine and jam. Pending the arrival of Juan, Wu, snugly seated by the dining-room fire, fell back upon the volume to kill time.

Presently, I noticed that his bored skippings had developed into close attention. He was absorbed, fascinated, enthralled by what he read. Once again, it seemed, the call of Sussex had been heard and answered—and by this most unlikely of all listeners-in—a hard-headed, avaricious Oriental of sixteen. East and West can never coalesce, asserts one of our famous men. But was that miraculous fusion actually taking place at last? Would Pekin, one day, understand London, and would the road to comprehension be through Sussex? I waited, thrilled.

"Where is Mountfield?" asked Wu suddenly.

"Mountfield?" The name immediately chilled me. I could associate the village, for the moment, with

nothing more inspiring that the residence of the Master of the foxhounds. "It is not far from Battle," I said. It had certainly that indirect lustre.

"Listen," cried Wu eagerly, glueing his narrow eyes to the handbook. "'In January, 1863, a man ploughing near John's Cross, in the parish of Mountfield, made a wonderful discovery of ancient gold. He dug up pieces of metal, and a number of rings, some of unusual size. Thinking his find to be brass he sold it for a few shillings. The purchase had been made by the buyer on behalf of a man called Stephen Willett, a fly proprietor.' Doubtless that has some other meaning than a keeper of insects. But, perhaps, all this is known to you?"

"Certainly not," I said loftily. (Let the miserable, disappointing youth classify Stephen Willett's business as he chose!) "Such incidents long ago became a commonplace in Sussex. It is the Ur of England. Something valuable is dug up nearly every day—it is impossible to keep pace with all the finds."

"Listen again" (Wu returned with increasing excitement to the handbook): "'This man—Willett—had been in California and accustomed to handling gold. He at once discerned the nature of the metal and re-sold it for more than five hundred pounds.'" Wu flung the book on the table, and jumped up. "Oh, that I had been the happy Willett! Do they plough at Mountfield now?"

I was spared the necessity of answering this intolerable question by the noiseless entrance of Juan, laden with parcels. He glided in softly, as he always did, and came up to me.

"Madame, I have shopped well—and bought, among other things, some skates——" he stopped

abruptly, at the sight of Wu. The two boys—the shrewd, dominating, egotistical Chinese, and Juan—delicate, amiable, generous—swiftly measured each other.

"I learned to use them," Juan added, "last year, in Switzerland. Already people are skating in the Bexhill park—the bus conductor spoke to me of it. But, probably, to-morrow I go to Battle, as the Vicar wishes." He sighed, took out his pocket-knife, and cut the string of his bulkiest package.

I left the boys to fraternise, and, eventually, to extract Claud's dreadful gramophone from his box. Upstairs, in his study, I found Erasmus sanguinely looking up the Battle buses in the new time-tables. His faith in human nature, surviving even long and shattering experiences of the modern boy, must be, I reflected, indestructible. . . .

On the following afternoon, the weather still clung to its Arctic programme, and the Vicar, clad in his warmest overcoat, vainly paced the frigid hall, calling alternately for Claud and Juan. Only silence answered him. The nests were empty, the birds had flown; the skates had vanished.

"I was not perfectly certain that the Vicar meant to-day," apologised Juan when, red and exhausted, they tumbled back to supper. His meagre acquaintance with our language coupled with a treacherous memory often enabled him to escape—or, at any rate, postpone—excursions of uncertain pleasure. "But I shall go to Battle, to-morrow, if it is fine." This was another saving clause. Juan was very particular about the weather, and traded on the freakish behaviour of the elements in England, in mid-winter.

"To-day is Friday, and, on Saturdays, I have other things to do than escort tiresome boys about the countryside." Erasmus was in no mood to deal leniently with the truants.

Having donned his warmest overcoat he had felt obliged to utilise it and the empty afternoon by paying calls among his flock. He had wound up with (strong) tea and (very hard) boiled eggs, at the Misses Pykes', who had told him, unashamed, that they were "taking a holiday from religion," adding, quite candidly, that they "didn't care how long it lasted." Nothing tends less, I suppose, to exhilarate the rural parson than a round of parochial visits—except, perhaps, ten minutes with the church officials.

"If you do not go to Battle until Monday, I may come, too," condescended Wu carelessly. "Three days' skating will possibly be sufficient."

Three days? Erasmus frowned. Had the (literally) godless youth forgotten that one of them was Sunday? Could he not abstain from his wild gyrations even for one day in seven?

"The conductor spoke to us of a girls' school, at the Abbey"—Juan ingenuously tracked Wu's new enthusiasm to its source.

But, on Monday, he and the Vicar went alone. Wu had acquired a weak ankle. Had Juan's Sunday bus conductor, while conveying him to Mass, undone his comrade's stimulating work by revealing that holidays at the Abbey still persisted, and had the tidings filtered through to Claud? I fancied so.

"The building is wonderful—ree-lly wonderful," declared Juan, on his return. "The towers and gardens, and gateways—above all, the entrance, of three storeys high, where the guide says an Abbot

lived, when one of your early Edwards reigned. Is much known of these grand Abbots?"

"Some of them were quite famous," I replied, "especially one called Hamo de Offington, who flourished—and fought—in the time of Richard II. I like Fuller's quaint description of his martial doings. Fuller says: 'In the beginning of his reign the King was in homage, and his Council (some will say) in their dotage, leaving the Sussex coast to defend itself.'"

"They must indeed have been quite mad," observed Erasmus. "If it had been any other county, it might not have mattered—but Sussex! You can continue, Miranda," he added indulgently, "that is, if you can remember the details correctly."

"I can but try," I said, laughing this affront aside. "Well, over came the French, plundering (the thing, says Fuller, was known in England long before the name) and carrying away captive the Prior of Lewes."

"The clergy have always suffered martyrdom," lamented Erasmus, "it is only the form that varies." (Physical violence in the fourteenth century—tea with the lapsing Misses Pyke, in the twentieth! Yes, Erasmus was right—it was only the method of assault that changed.)

"Then the watchful Abbot got the wind up," I continued, "remembering the saying, 'Ware the Abbot of Battle when the Prior of Lewes is taken prisoner.' Hastily the Abbot mustered his men and marched to Winchelsea, the French following him. They dared him to send out three or four men to fight an equal number of the enemy, and decide the mastery. 'I do not send out my men in parcels,' replied the Abbot, with much dignity, 'I am a spiritual

person, here to defend and not attack.' The French, furious, let fly their guns, but soon they were driven off, and, as Fuller phrases it, the Abbot became 'not only the saver of Sussex but of England.'"

"I shall not easily forget the valorous Abbot or his wonderful Abbey," enthused Juan, "and I go probably to Bodiam to-morrow."

"Bodiam next week," said the Vicar briskly, well pleased that Battle had whetted Juan's appetite for further expeditions. "To-morrow, I am due at Hastings, and I wish you and Claud to accompany me, and explore the castle and caves while I am at a meeting."

The ready compliance of the Chinese might have suggested some sinister design to a mind less perennially hopeful than the Vicar's. True, he knew nothing then of the flaunting "Lady with the Scarlet Fan," who beckoned alluringly to intrigued youth from Hastings cinema placards and was to entice both Wu and Juan from the plain path of duty.

"I do not understand why you say so much in praise of Sussex," objected Wu, when Erasmus, at supper afterwards, forcibly rebuked them for this dereliction. "The county is not on the top in cricket, and though, with football, there is Brighton and Hove among the clubs, where and what are *they?*" His scornful accents fell most unpleasantly upon our South Saxon ears, and Juan nervously helped himself to an excess of beetroot.

"Sussex," said the Vicar, disdaining argument upon these immaterial points and ready with a counter-stroke, "has produced five Archbishops of Canterbury"—(What were whole phalanxes of Gillinghams or Aston Villas in comparison with this

distinction?)—"not lately, certainly, when Scotland has been ransacked for Primates; but five, up to the seventeenth century. The last was Juxon, who ministered to Charles I upon the scaffold. It must have been an immense comfort to the King to have had a Sussex man beside him at that tragic moment."

"Perhaps the executioner was Sussex, too, and not so comforting," suggested Wu wickedly. "I have read of one, at least, who was from Brighton, James——"

"Where exactly is Winchelsea?" asked Juan hurriedly, with great presence of mind. "It must be ter-rible to live there, for the Vicar's handbooks tell of the tempests that raged there, of the violence of winds and the sea swallowing up the old town."

"That occurred long ago—six centuries back," I said laughing—"but at Bodiam you will run no risks. Fix that up, both of you, for Thursday."

This conversation was on Tuesday, and on Wednesday a rapid thaw set in. Wu's weak ankle, which had fluctuated curiously according to the condition of the ice, now became a permanent hindrance to activity. He could only crawl—so he said—into the bus and out of it into a school-friend's house at Cooden, or the White Rock Pavilion, where a thé dansant sometimes had a temporarily bracing effect. The Bodiam outing was cancelled, Juan prophesying rain—and expeditions to Herstmonceux and Camber were, like the weddings of disillusioned lovers, "indefinitely postponed."

On Saturday, a letter from worthy Mr. Clarke recalled Wu to school and announced his failure in the examination.

"I do not comprehend your examiners' ways," protested Wu indignantly, when the blow had fallen,

"considering that I know and can do so much. English, French—I speak jolly well; at my school, I am one with authority—a prefect; at tennis, my back strokes surpass even those of Higgs, who once beat Betty Nuthall's brother. I have been to your London and seen all, all, all—the Oval, Hendon, the Coliseum, the Zoo. I can find my way, without inquiry, to any Bexhill tea shop——"

"Wretched young man!" The Vicar spoke so loudly that Flash and Barbara, abruptly roused from their slumbers in two cushioned chairs, sprang out and barked angrily. "Wretched young man—yours has indeed been a double disaster. Not only have you deservedly failed in your examination—you have missed the greatest opportunity of your life—you have failed to 'see' Sussex. Of the many visitors who have come to the Vicarage favoured with that most worth-while of all chances—you alone have been entirely negligent, cold, indifferent, blind——" Never had I seen Erasmus so deeply moved. Juan, I observed, was trembling. "Here, amid the romance, the beauty, the glamour and stir of an historic past in which you might have purged your earthly soul——"

"Um," muttered Wu, brazenly interrupting. "If I leave early, can I have my travelling money now?"

The callous Oriental picked up his frightful gramophone, and held out his other hand. . . .

The snow was again falling, in big flakes, when Wu began his journey, wrapping the county in a lovely mantle, veiling its charm from the vision of one wholly incapable of ever really "seeing" it.

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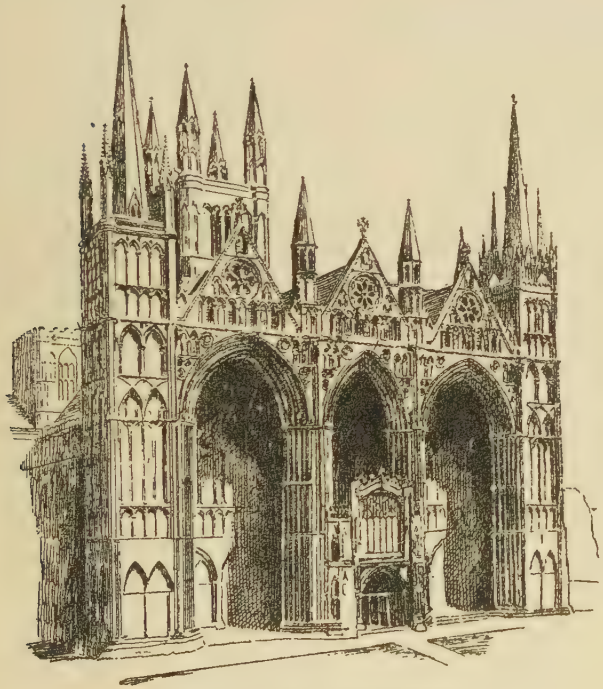

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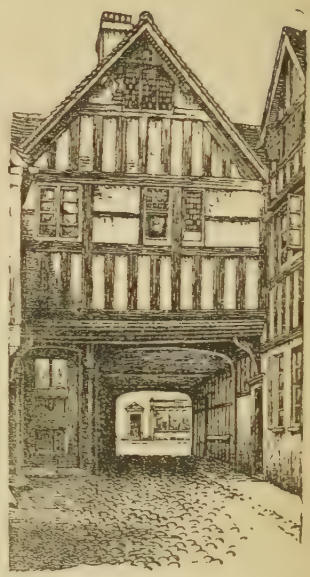

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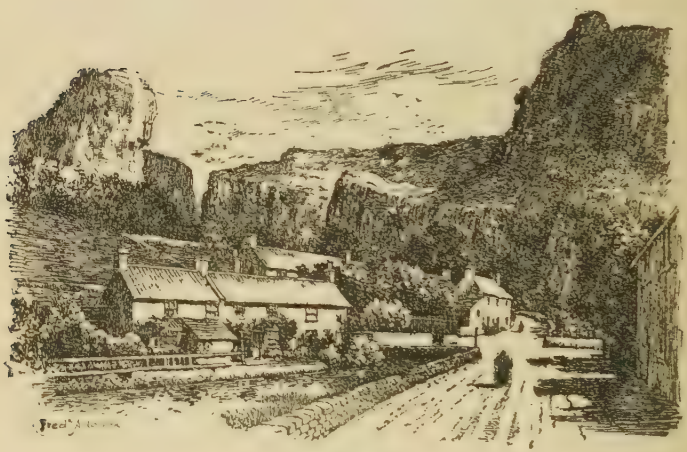

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Here again Mr. Fred Adcock is at his best in his artistic translation of the scenes depicted, and this book, with its companion on the opposite page—*Wessex*—forms an admirable literary and descriptive guide of the beauties of South-Western England.

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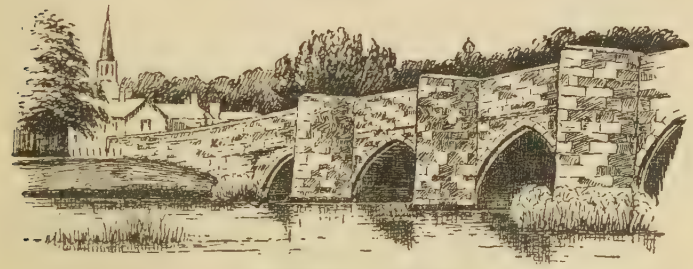

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The wild country—surrounding the fashionable resorts of Buxton and Matlock, and also the lowlands of the Trent and Sherwood Forest, are adequately described by the author, who contributes a large number of his own sketches to enhance the interest of his descriptions of scenery—old houses—castles and churches, and in this he is ably assisted by Mr. Adcock.

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WALTHAM ABBEY

The interest of this book is enhanced by the author's thumb-nail sketches, and it is hoped that his work will do something to help conserve the rural amenities still left within fifty miles of London.

This is another volume in the *English Countryside Series*, and, like the others, it is priced at seven shillings and sixpence.